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The shadow of Eversleigh

Jane Lansdowne



From L. to C.

Christmas, Dec. 25th, 1908.

4-1-17

THE SHADOW OF EVERSLEIGH

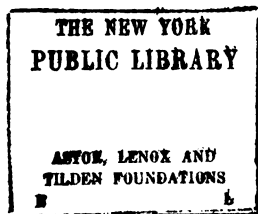
THE SHADOW OF EVERSLEIGH

BY
JANE LANSDOWNE



NEW YORK CINCINNATI CHICAGO
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1908

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13X32

The Shadow of Eversleigh

Introduction written by Roger Ibbetson Eversleigh, by whom was builded the chantry chapel in the woods at Combe Eversleigh:

It hath of late occurred to me that for the enlightenment of some of them of our name now alive, and for the instruction of them that shall come after, it would be well to gather together into one place the papers relating to the causes which have urged me to build the chantry chapel at Combe Eversleigh; which papers have until now been scattered in divers receptacles, and mixed with many documents relating to other matters than the said chapel. And to have such of said papers as were writ in Latin and French done into English that all may read.

For it hath appeared unto some, even of my relatives and near friends, a strange thing and almost unaccountable, that in these times and now, when our house hath been these many years impoverished by the payment of the fines imposed on all them who, for conscience' sake, do refrain from attending in the churches at the services established by law, I should have gone to the expense and labor of building a chantry chapel

wherein the blessed Mass can be offered only with peril even now. Though I trust that by the favor of the King's Majesty, in whose service my father, Miles Ibbetson Eversleigh, fell while fighting bravely at the battle of Worcester, and through the good-will of our neighbors, who have always shown themselves friendly and courteous hitherto, no great risk may be incurred.

And I pray all them for whose enlightenment these papers have been writ or brought together that by means of said papers they will read my motives aright; and that of their charity they will have the holy Mass offered, and will pray in said chantry for the souls of them for whom it was builded; more especially for the souls of Mistress Muriel Eversleigh, and of me,

ROGER IBBETSON EVERSLEIGH

of Combe Eversleigh, in the County of Somerset; who did write these presents in the year of grace 1660. Being the fifth after the Restoration of His Most Gracious Majesty, Charles II.

CHAPTER I

CICELY'S NARRATIVE

I, CICELY IBBETSON, who had hoped to end my days in peace, and that speedily, since I have seen more than fourscore years, and all them whom I knew and loved in my young years have gone before me to the grave, have been sought out in my quiet home on the distant shores of Brittany, and bidden to write what I remember of my life at Combe Eversleigh, now nearly sixty years ago.

What I remember? Ah, me, what do I forget? The terraced gardens and the waving trees of my old home are more present to me at this moment than are the rocks and sands which lie before these narrow windows, and which my old eyes can scarcely see; and I hear the cawing of the rooks at Eversleigh with ears that hardly catch the roaring of the waves.

Much have I forgotten that has chanced in age and middle life, but my bright youth is with me as though it were yesterday; and while I close my dim eyes for a moment and pause with pen uplifted in my hand, I am a girl again, looking for birds' nests in the shrubbery with Marmaduke, or planning with Muriel the building of a chapel in the wood. But they who have asked that I should write this history—far-away relatives of the house

of Eversleigh, for the old stock died out long ago, and for what reason they wish for these memories I know not—they, I say, would have the tale from the beginning.

So must I needs relate how I first came to Combe Eversleigh, and what I learned later of the fortunes of the house before I came.

Sir Miles Eversleigh was a brave and noble gentleman, who fought on the right side at the battle of Bosworth, and afterward rose high in favor at court by reason of the part he took in bringing about the marriage of Elizabeth of York with his Majesty, the seventh Henry. Sir Miles himself was wedded to a lady who brought him much wealth, and with her he settled at Combe Eversleigh, where, in course of time, three fair children were born to them, and the lady died.

To one of those children, sweet Mistress Audrey Eversleigh, do I owe all the love I ever knew in early childhood, and such upbringing as beseemed a maid of my degree: for she was my godmother, and when all others were wanting to me she took me to her heart and home. The other two were boys; and of these the elder, Marmaduke, I never saw. Long before I came to Combe Eversleigh he had quarreled with Sir Miles, his father, and left his home forever. But the second son, another Miles, I knew and held in honor and reverence, albeit to love a man so stern and cold as he

was for the most part while I dwelt under his roof was scarce possible to me.

For my own coming to Eversleigh, it happened in this wise as I shall now set down; and if much sorrow befell in after years and many griefs through my abode there, yet had I much happiness also in the old house, and many joys.

My mother was a far-off and humble relative of the Eversleighs, and from their home and service she married a yeoman of her own degree. But she gave her life for mine, and shortly after her death my father, Giles Ibbetson, took a second wife, not knowing what to do with the wailing infant left upon his hands. Other children came in time to the homestead ere I was old enough to be of use in tending them, and under my step-dame my life was a hard one—all the harder when my father died.

Then Mistress Audrey Eversleigh heard of our trouble, and for love of my mother, who had been her own companion and friend when they were girls together, she offered to take care of me and my fortunes, and right glad was Dame Ibbetson to be rid of the charge.

Mistress Audrey had been troth-plight in her youth to a gallant cavalier, but he joined the wars and fell in battle ere the day came that was fixed for the wedding, and she never thought of marriage again after that. Her father died, and then she lived at Combe Eversleigh with her brother,

and became the mistress of his household when his lady died after giving birth to a son. I was seven years old when she took me to Combe Eversleigh, and the son of Sir Miles was two years older than I. We straightway became fast friends, and the little book-lore I have was gained with much labor, not for any pleasure I took in its acquiring, but because he said he found his lessons easier when I learned them at his side.

His father was a second son; but the elder, when he grew up to manhood, or later, for Miles was married when the thing befell, had a fierce quarrel with his father, of which none rightly knew the cause, and left Combe Eversleigh in anger, vowing that he would not darken the doors of the Hall again. He kept his word, and the old Sir Miles from that day forth was never heard to mention his elder son. But in two years from the time of Marmaduke's departure Sir Miles was dead. When his testament was read it was found that all his wealth—and he had amassed great riches—was to go with the estate of Combe Eversleigh, always excepting certain legacies and the portions of his daughter and younger son.

Of Sir Marmaduke, the heir, no tidings could be gained, albeit inquiries were made throughout the land, and large sums of money offered as reward to any who would give a clue to where he might be found. At last the younger brother took the place that was declared by all to be his, and

Marmaduke was counted with the dead. Thus much I learned in the room of Dame Gillian, the housekeeper at Eversleigh, to whom I went daily for instruction in spinning and all womanly craft which behoved a maiden of my degree to know. In good truth, I learned much gossip besides.

Mistress Audrey herself taught me proper behavior, and how to embroider in quaint devices, and to play on the virginals and to sing; and as I have said, I learned to read in English with the young Marmaduke from his tutor, and some Latin as well. I think no little maiden was ever happier than I during those first years at Combe Eversleigh, and happiest of all when I had lived two years with my kind mistress and godmother, for then came Muriel to be loved and cared for—the veriest sunbeam that ever brightened the old house.

CHAPTER II

MURIEL

SIR MILES EVERSLEIGH, the father of the young Marmaduke, when I first knew him was a man of thirty-five or younger, for he had married in his early years, and the loss of his lady, whom I never saw, had been his first great sorrow, saving indeed that of his brother, whom, it was said by those who knew them both, he had dearly loved. But these troubles befell long before I came to Eversleigh; and Sir Miles perhaps was too young or his spirits too buoyant to suffer him to give way altogether to the grief that for a time overshadowed his life. He was tall and handsome, as were all the Eversleighs, with a bright smile, a sparkling eye, and a kind word for all who chanced to come in his way. Even me he noticed in genial fashion, and seemed glad that the son whom he loved more than all things should have a playmate of his own age, albeit I was but a maid.

In the second summer of my abiding at Eversleigh, Sir Miles left home suddenly, and in the room of Dame Gillian I heard that before his departure he had confided the motive of that journey to none—not even to Mistress Audrey, who had dwelt with him from childhood, and with whom it was believed all his counsels were shared. He was

absent many weeks, nay, months, from Eversleigh, for he left when the June roses were beginning to bloom, and the apples were ripe and rosy on the old trees in the orchard ere he returned.

And then he came not alone, but brought with him a woman wearing strange garments and speaking in a foreign tongue, which Mistress Audrey said was Italian; and, moreover, bearing in her arms a sleeping child of wondrous beauty, a little girl of three years old—our Muriel.

Seventy years and more have passed since I first saw her standing in the sunshine on the terrace at Combe Eversleigh, for I met not that strange woman on the night of her coming, neither did I see the child. Yet I have but to close my dim old eyes for a moment and forthwith I behold her, the fairest creature, surely, that ever gladdened mortal sight.

Small she was even for her three short summers, with cheeks like the apple-bloom in springtime, black eyes that sparkled and flashed like jewels, and a very wealth of raven hair that hung in shining ringlets far below her shoulders even then. No word of English could she speak but her own name, Muriel, and saving that strange nurse and Mistress Audrey, not one of us could understand her pretty baby speech. But, ah, how we loved her! Like a butterfly she darted about among the flowers, for pent within stone walls she would not be, and all day long she trilled sweet snatches of

tiny songs, and her baby voice was like a bird's. The whole household was at the feet of the little queen who had come among us, and from that day until her death she ruled us all.

From the time of his return to Eversleigh, Sir Miles was an altered man. His eye was downcast and gloomy, his brow had grown stern, and the gladness had departed from his voice forever. I chanced to be in the library one day poring over a lesson that was hard to learn, for my mind was away among the autumn flowers with Marmaduke and Muriel, when Sir Miles came in and threw himself wearily into the great chair by the table. I shrank behind the curtain of the window and wished that I were away.

Mistress Audrey entered softly and stood before her brother. "Miles," she said, "whose is the infant whom you have brought to Eversleigh, and what place in the household is hers?"

Sir Miles lifted not his head from the hand whereon it rested; methought that he was ill at ease, and his voice sounded not like his as he made reply:

"The child is the daughter of my old friend and kinsman, Ralph Eversleigh, Audrey. I deemed that I told thee so yest'reen. I promised her father on his death-bed that she should be to me as my own, and God helping me," here his voice faltered and shook until I wept with admiration to see the strong man thus broken by the loss of his

friend, "God helping me, I will keep my word. And if she wills it, and Marmaduke, they shall wed when both are of full age. If the care of so young a child be too much for thee, Audrey, she may be sent to the convent of our Cousin Millicent, who will see to her upbringing until such time as she shall be well grown."

"The care of the little one will be my chief pleasure, my brother. May God bless the charity that prompted thee to take charge of Ralph's orphan child," said Mistress Audrey, gravely, and her voice also had a tone that was new to me, something of bitterness such as I had never known before in her who was all gentleness; or was it my own conscience and dread of being caught in the very act of eavesdropping that made those two voices sound more stern than heretofore in my guilty ears?

I was shaking with the terror caused by my misdeed, and yet did my heart spring with pleasure when Mistress Audrey said that Muriel should stay; for already I had begun to love the blithe presence that had come to brighten our lives. My kind godmother turned and walked slowly from the room when her short speech was done, and I longed to follow her and confess that, hidden behind the wide curtains, I had heard all. But I dared not move lest Sir Miles should discover me, and so I cowered, trembling in my hiding-place for what seemed long hours, to my despair.

At last he dropped his head upon his folded arms that lay upon the table, and I was fain to believe that he slept. So, gathering such courage as I might from a brief prayer, I stepped lightly over the polished oak flooring to the door, afraid that my own breathing might betray me, until I reached the stair, and so out into the garden, where I found Muriel under a plum-tree, holding up her tiny skirt for the ripe fruit which Marmaduke showered down upon her from on high.

That night, ere my last prayers were said, I sought Mistress Audrey, and kneeling at her side, confessed with many tears the fault whereof I had been guilty in hearing what was not intended for my ears. And my godmother, to my no small amazement, wept with me. But she did not chide; only, laying her hand on my bowed head, she said:

"It was scarce fault of thine, my Cicely, since thou couldst not well get away; and thou art a discreet maiden for one so young. Take heed that thou repeat not, even to Marmaduke, what passed between thy good master, Sir Miles, and me in the library to-day."

I promised as readily as I might for sobbing, and Mistress Audrey went on:

"Combe Eversleigh has been a home to thee, Cicely, and I think we have made it a happy one. Now has thy turn come to do for the little Muriel what hath hitherto been done—what, with God's help, we shall always try to do—for thee. In a

few days hence the nurse will return to her own land, and from that time forth thou wilt be Mistress Muriel's little maid. God grant that thou be to her as true and faithful a friend as in my young days thy mother was to me! We must do what we may to bring up the sweet babe in the love of God and His blessed Mother; and so that she may be an honor to our house."

And with that Mistress Audrey bent down and kissed my forehead—a token of affection I had scarce ever received from her before; and although from the first day of my coming to Eversleigh I had loved her dearly, I think she bound my heart to her, ay, and to sweet Muriel also, forever, with that kiss.

Now matters came about even as Mistress Audrey had said. In a few days the foreign woman departed, leaving Muriel, and much we feared that the little one would fret when she found that her nurse did not return. But it was not so. She gazed in wonder on Luisa, as she called the woman, when she saw her tears, thinking, it may be, that none but children weep. But when Marmaduke called her to see a young pigeon that had fallen from the dovecote she danced lightly away, and for aught we could discover, gave not another thought to Luisa; and yet the woman's heart, while longing for home, was wrung with the bitterness of parting from the child of her love.

So was it ever with Muriel. As time went on she loved not her toys or the puppets we decked for her save while their freshness lasted; and would throw aside her baby at any time for a new plaything, never thinking again of what she seemed at first to love so dearly, nor caring what became of aught that had grown ill-favored or worn.

Now, with me, Cicely, it was quite otherwise, for I could ill bear to part with the baubles I had once loved even when I had outgrown and was ashamed of them; but hid them away in a closet where hung my riding-skirt and the robe that I wore on Sundays, and crept there stealthily, when none were by, to fondle and look at them privily sometimes. For a wooden baby whose arms were gone I cherished a special affection, and had once shed passionate tears when Marmaduke called her an old soldier and vowed she should be tried in court and executed for a traitor because he knew by the color of her garments that she had fought on the wrong side in the wars.

Now, with puppet that lacked leg or arm Muriel would have naught to do, but threw such aside and looked on them disdainfully; so I gathered all broken toys together, and when carefully mended they made a brave show at Yuletide, and filled with gladness the hearts of the little ones from the village when they came to the Hall for their Christmas gifts.

I have said that Muriel ruled all at Combe

Eversleigh, but none was so willing or constant a slave to the small maiden as was Marmaduke, whose love and devotion increased from day to day, ay, and from year to year, and was unchanging; for his was of those constant natures that never can grow cold where they once have loved.

When Muriel was seven years old and he was thirteen, tall and strong for his age and full of all courtesy and nobleness, though but a boy, his father took him away to a great school of learning more than three days' ride from Combe Eversleigh. When Muriel heard that he must leave us she stamped her tiny foot in passionate anger, and wept, and vowed he should not go. Then came Mistress Audrey with a string of gold beads that had once belonged to my lady, her mother, and promised the little one she should have the trinket for her own, so she would not weep. And straightway smiles broke forth ere the tears were dry, and in the pleasure of her new possession Muriel thought of Marmaduke's departure no more.

Sir Miles saw the beads glittering on the fair baby neck and exclaimed to Mistress Audrey in amaze:

"So, Audrey!" and methought there was a tone of displeasure in his wonder, too, "hast thou given this child our mother's pearls?"

She answered without looking at him:

"Yea, brother. I ween there be none who have a better right to wear them than Muriel."

At that he knitted his stern brow and turned away.

Now, to this trinket Muriel clung as she cleaved to no other thing, and this I for mine own part would gladly have had her sometimes lay aside, for Sir Miles regarded it with little favor. His dark glance grew darker always when he caught the glitter of the shining beads. I, knowing of no other cause for his misliking, deemed that he loved not to see upon another the ornament which his mother had worn.

There were clouds at that time over Eversleigh, for Marmaduke was gone; Sir Miles was colder and more gloomy than ever; and more than once I found sweet Mistress Audrey in tears. Yet was I happy, save for Marmaduke's absence, with Muriel, who loved me dearly if she loved anything in this world; albeit she showed her love mainly by insisting on my service, and weeping when I was called away to do aught for any other than herself. My good mistress and godmother gave her gentle chiding at times for infant tyranny, and bade her not abuse my too great affection, as she was pleased to name my love for the fair child.

But when Muriel pouted and wept, my pain was greater than hers, and Mistress Audrey, seeing this, relented, and so the little maiden had her way. And thus was it ever and with every one. Even Sir Miles, though he showed her little love in outward seeming, gave the child in all things her will; nor dared any to contradict her before him.

CHAPTER III

MARMADUKE

I HAVE said that despite his indulgence of our bright Muriel, her stern guardian showed her little love, and this to me, to whom she was the light of the eyes, was wondrous strange. But stranger still was the even less love he showed for the fair son who had once been his idol, and treasured beyond what the gifts God lends should be. For what are the gifts of God but loans to His creatures? And even in my young years I noted that He not seldom reclaims them as His own; more especially when their earthly holders set them up to worship in His place.

It is true that at this time whereof I write, God in His mercy did not reclaim our Marmaduke; but the shadow on his father became heavier and darker every day. From his sister Sir Miles grew more and more estranged as years went on; but, for what reason I know not, to me he was ever a kind kinsman and good lord, and willed at times to have me about him, and was pleased with my service, when, for the stern darkness that hung over him, all others were glad to keep away.

And I could not but note, though by none was the fact mentioned among us out of the respect we bore to the master of the house, that when all knelt

at the altar to receive in love and reverence the blessed body of the Lord, Sir Miles approached not with his people—not even at Pasch time or Yuletide, when none save hardened sinners, or great penitents whose term of penance was not ended, kept away.

And when these festivals came round in their course Mistress Audrey was wont to spend much time in the oratory, and I saw with sorrow that she waxed ever paler and her step grew weaker and more slow. Surely I too must have saddened had I been older and wiser, but it is in the nature of youth to be glad. Then my dear lady and Muriel both coveted my tendance, and letters came from Marmaduke which made us happy, albeit they came rarely and were brief enough. It may be that we looked for them more anxiously and greeted them more joyfully for that.

Five years was he absent from Eversleigh, save for such brief spaces as were allowed to the scholars at Easter and midsummer as respite from hard study; for when he had learned at Eton all they could teach him, and had won from the masters both praise and blame, as we were made aware by papers that were sent from time to time to Combe Eversleigh, then had he to spend two years at Oxford. Though what need could be of so much lore for one who was neither priest nor lawyer, but a simple gentleman, Mistress Audrey and I could not understand.

Still less could Muriel, who had no love for learning in any shape, nor could ever be brought to sit long over her books. She sang like a bird and danced as I never could; played sometimes on the virginals, and on a mandolin Marmaduke once brought her as a gift. But she hated to work with a needle, whether at the broidery frame or in fashioning garments, and in the making of confections and suchlike housewifely arts had little skill.

It may be that we spoiled her—Mistress Audrey, Dame Gillian, and I; but in very truth it seemed ever that Muriel was like the birds and blossoms, a creature sent to make earth beautiful, and all too fair and lovely to be put to common use. So deemed Marmaduke, I ween, at those rare seasons when he left his school and came in summer time to spend a few short weeks at Eversleigh.

Bright, happy weeks those were for Muriel and for me; happier still, I verily believe, for Marmaduke. Then it was that we three wandered forth into the meadows or the woods, or rode together through the green lanes without a thought that life to any one of us could bring aught but joy. And then it was that in careless gladness a thing was planned which, much I fear, albeit indirectly, brought grievous trouble at a future day.

It fell out in this wise. Marmaduke was at Eversleigh and we won leave for idleness, as we ever strove to do in the time of his brief stay.

And as it was in the bright summer time when all the earth is decked with beauty by the hand of God—which verily seemed to me to work more wondrously in trees and flowers and skies at Combe Eversleigh than I have seen elsewhere, shedding abroad wealth of blossoms and dewdrops and all fair creatures that disport themselves in the woods and fields—we, that is, Marmaduke and Muriel and I, dwelt for the most part in the air and sunshine; and many days we spent beneath the old trees around the Manor, seated on the mossy ground and singing madrigals, or listening to the wondrous legends read by Marmaduke from ancient books, of which in the library there was great store, or recited by him from memory—and for this last kind of recreation he had a wondrous gift.

We, who never wearied of listening, always calling for another story when the last was done, learned more in those glad holidays than by hard study we had accomplished during the whole past year.

Now there was in the wood at Combe Eversleigh a spot that we loved beyond all others for the shadow of the tall trees that encircled it, and the soft greenness of the moss on which we sat, and (if indeed this were not fancy, as belike it must have been) for the glory of the sky above that seemed more beautiful in its flecking of fair clouds than all the rest of the wide heaven. The murmur of the tiny waterfall came to us from below; the

cooing of the wood-pigeons sounded about us, and the red squirrels sprang among the branches, barking, perchance, because we had invaded their domain.

These sounds and many others that whispered or echoed through the woods disturbed us not, and methinks that in time the denizens of the greenwood learned to know and welcome us, for they grew so tame that they approached us fearlessly. Some birds there were, that, when the others were in ambush, would take the crumbs I proffered from my hand. I know not wherefore the shy creatures stood more in terror of Muriel than of me, but so it was . . .

Lo! I have wandered from my story, as I am ever apt to do when my mind reverts to those happy days and to Combe Eversleigh.

It chanced that once Marmaduke read for us the legend of a lovely lady who was betrothed to a brave and noble knight. But ere the bridals could be solemnized his liege lord called on all true Christian warriors to follow him to Palestine and do battle there for the sepulcher of the Lord.

The lady wept when her lover left her, and for a time she pined away; until a holy priest came to the castle where she dwelt, who saw her grief, and chid her for her selfish sorrow which could do good to none. He bade her rather pray for her absent warrior, and strive by good works and deeds of charity to lighten the lives of God's poor whom

we have always with us, and so win the favor of heaven for the noble knight.

The maiden hearkened to these words of counsel and dried her tears. And she sold the trinkets she had once loved dearly—belike because they made her fairer in his eyes—and spent the price thereof among the poor. And of the riches of her substance she did cause a chapel to be builded all of fair white stone, with an altar of marble and fine carvings, and sculptor's work to adorn the same. And when it was finished and furnished forth with all whatsoever is becoming to the house of God, a priest said Mass there daily for the safe return of that knight, and that God in His mercy might be pleased to rescue him from all the perils he must needs encounter both by land and sea.

Long years passed away, bearing with them the youth, and mayhap the beauty, of the maiden, but leaving her always her love, and her hope and trust in God. At last he returned for whom she had waited so faithfully and long, and told her that he had been a prisoner to the Paynims and during weary years had despaired of ever looking on her face again.

But through all those years, and they were many, a strange thing had befallen every day. At a certain hour a sense of comfort had come to him as though friends were near, and daily had the fetters fallen from his hands and feet, and he had remained unshackled for the space perhaps of half

an hour. Then by comparing of dates and counting of days, they found that this grace had come to him every day at the hour when the blessed Mass was offered for him in the chapel which her love had built!

Beyond all doubt the legend was beautiful, and so entirely were our souls enchained by the story of the knight and his true love that we forgot to clamor for another. For some space we were silent.

Then Muriel, who had little love for thought when it became too earnest, cried:

"I marvel much at the miracle wrought upon the good knight's fetters in his dungeon; were like wonders worked in answer to my devotion, methinks that I could oftener pray."

"And wouldst thou be as constant, and as patient in waiting, as true, as was the maiden in the tale?" asked Marmaduke, somewhat wistfully, for he loved our bright Muriel dearly, albeit she was scarce more at that time than a child.

She merrily declared that she could wait and love and pray all three had she but a fair chapel to pray in; and forthwith he vowed that if naught else were needed, verily a chapel she should have. And he demanded where it was her pleasure that her shrine should be built.

She said that nowhere had she seen a spot more beautiful than that wherein we then were, and she thought it the most fitting for a chapel of Our

Lady that could be conceived. And forthwith we began, we three, to build a bower in the woodland, of bended boughs and woven branches, with such skill as we had. We fitted seats and kneeling cushions of moss in our chapel, and planted all about it flowers and vines and creeping things, working with such will that in a short time it was finished; and then we repaired thither daily in fair weather to sing and tell tales and count our beads.

Tall as he was, and in years almost a man, Marmaduke had not outgrown—I thank God he never did outgrow—his love for Our Lady; and I verily believe that he died as he had lived, her faithful and devoted son. But whether he loved not our chapel in the woods, for so we always called our rustic shrine, for Muriel's sake rather than for a higher reason, in truth I can not say.

So the summer passed and he left us, and it was long before we saw him again. First he had to finish those weary studies at Oxford, and afterward to travel in France and Italy, so that when at last we welcomed him again to Combe Eversleigh he had grown to man's estate, and even Muriel was no longer a child.

In all those years there was but little change in our way of living. Sir Miles grew more gloomy, my good Mistress Audrey more holy, sweet Muriel more lovely; that was all. Marmaduke wrote to us long letters whenever he knew of a sure hand whereby to send them, and once he bade Muriel

and his "good Cis," as he was wont to call me, for he said the word stood for my name and for sister, and that must I ever be to him—he bade us, I say, to say a chaplet for him more fervently than even our custom was before Our Lady of the Woods, since he doubted not but he had made for himself an enmity that was like to endure for life.

The manner of that mishap had been in this wise. Some students at the college had fallen into evil ways, and for a long time their doings remained undiscovered, but at last they were guilty of some crime, the which Marmaduke did not name to us in his letter, but only declared that the committal thereof was unworthy of Christian men. Now, the same came to his knowledge and to that of those who had the young men in charge, and when by these Marmaduke was questioned on the matter, he gave, as truth and justice compelled him to do, such testimony as procured the dismissal of the ringleader in the mischief from the college, whence he was sent in disgrace. And he came of a race, so Marmaduke in his letter informed us, that seldom forgave. But of all this he charged us to breathe no word to his father, whom he would not disquiet to no purpose. It was to Mistress Audrey that letter was addressed.

We, Muriel and I, had promised when he left us that we would be true ladies to our absent knight and pray for him without fail in our woodland chapel every day. And he had sent from

London a most fair image of Our Lady to set up therein, finely carved in alabaster, and so beautiful that we had never looked upon its like. And he bade us get Giles Carpenter to fit over the image a shelter of wood to protect it from the summer rain, and when he should return to Combe Eversleigh and might do in small things as he would, he would build for Our Lady a chapel of white stone like that which the true maiden of the legend built for her knight, and there would he have the holy Mass said in time if God willed.

So every day while the summer lasted we had gone to our bower and said the chaplet for Marmaduke, and sometimes, but rarely, Mistress Audrey had gone with us, too. And now we prayed as we were bidden, more fervently, and for some space were disquieted at heart. But time went on and we heard no more of this quarrel, and so by degrees it passed out of mind.

But few events broke the stillness of the years as they went by. We were never allowed to go from Combe Eversleigh, nor did any company from without come to us. Sir Miles would have it so. It befitted, he said, that a maid like Muriel should live retired. Only once a younger brother of my dead father came to learn how I fared, and to carry news of my well-being to my kindred, whom I seldom saw; though I knew that my brothers were growing up to manhood, and my heart yearned for them at times. The Ibbetsons

had served the Eversleighs since the days of Norman William, it was said, and this mine Uncle Richard had followed one of the name to the wars. But his master was slain, and mine uncle had a small inheritance, so he thought to settle down in his latter years, and till his fields in peace.

Standing with me on the terrace at Combe Eversleigh, where he had met warm welcome, tendered for my sake and his own, he saw sweet Muriel tripping by on her way to the garden, and asked who might be that lovely maiden, since he knew that she could be no daughter of Sir Miles. And I answered that she was the child of Ralph Eversleigh, a far-off cousin of Sir Miles; that she was as good as affianced to the heir of Eversleigh, Marmaduke; and that she was the light of our eyes. Mine uncle was a hard-faced man and stern, albeit ever kind and gentle in his manner to me; and now he drew his gray brows together and frowned darkly as he answered my speech:

“Whose daughter that fair child may be, Niece Cicely, in truth I can not tell; but Ralph Eversleigh’s certes she is not, nor had he ever wife in Italy. I fought by his side for many a year after leaving the service of his brother; ay, and stood over his dead body on the battlefield long before yonder maiden was born. Nay, flush not so hotly, nor begin to entreat, good Cicely;” for I knew Sir Miles, and dreaded that any should say of him or his aught that he would not care to hear, and so

belike mine eyes and cheeks spoke for me, though my tongue was silent. "I am no prier into other men's secrets, and Sir Miles hath been good kinsman to thee, Cis, when mayhap I neglected thee. So be she who she may, the lady will trouble me no more."

But the thought of my uncle's speech troubled me, and I pondered much whether I should relate to Mistress Audrey what he had said to me—or perhaps mention it to Father Norbert when I went to shrift. Still, the thing was not my secret that I should reveal it to my mistress, nor a sin that I need confess. So I e'en strove in cowardly fashion to forget that I had heard it, and in short space mine uncle left Eversleigh and I saw him no more until he died.

CHAPTER IV

A BETROTHAL

METHINKS that my good Mistress Audrey, who divined all things that concerned the comfort and well-being of others, especially of them that did in any way depend upon her, and most of all of me, her poor servant and cousin, must have known that my heart yearned at times for them of my near kin. My next brother, Roger, who in age was little more than two years younger than I, had found a place in the great school at Winchester, which was even then much frequented by many sons of yeomen and others of a like degree who loved learning and were willing to spend their young years in the pursuit thereof. After passing through the classes in that place with much credit and honor, he would have gone thence to New College, Oxford, as students from that school are wont to do, but, by what means I know not, it was procured that he should enter as a commoner so that an Ibbetson might be near an Eversleigh, according to old custom, which was well pleasing to both.

I had often heard of my young brother from Marmaduke, who spoke much in praise of the goodness of his character and the excellence of his parts; and I longed to see him on whom I had

never once set eyes since I left him, a naughty imp of five years old who tormented me greatly, after the fashion of his age, although even then I had loved him well. So now that this same Roger had finished his schooling and learned in London as much law as was needful, Mistress Audrey proposed to her brother that mine should come to Eversleigh and take up his abode with our land steward, Master Walters, to be of assistance to the old man now, and learn all matters pertaining to the lands at Eversleigh, and take the steward's place whenever the same Master Walters, by reason of his age and infirmities, might think fit to retire.

Right glad was I to see and embrace him, albeit to have a brother taller and seeming older than I was a strange thing at first. Roger had tarried in London for a year or more ere he came to us, and from him we learned more of the great city and its ways than we had ever heard in all our lives before. He had seen the King's Majesty and Queen Katherine, and store of fine lords and ladies, and had even had speech with such great folk as the Lord Chancellor, who, they do say, was no more in his young years than a butcher's son at Ipswich, but was now held in scarce less honor than the King's Grace; and Sir Thomas More, a great lawyer whom Roger had in high esteem, but of whom at that time we simple country folk had never heard. Ah, me! the world has heard of him

since then. And I do think that it must be far better to live as he must in the memories of all good men than to have died King of England, as his ungrateful master did.

It seemed strange to Roger, I ween, to meet with two such simple ones as were Muriel and I, who in all our lives had never been beyond the bounds of our own village, unless perchance some twice or thrice at Easter or Pentecost when we won permission to visit Midsummer Norton or Wincanton for the fair; and even thither Sir Miles loved not to see us go. And to us it was no less wondrous to meet with one who had seen store of great folk and now thought little of it; although he had come seldom into grand company, being not of such degree.

Before Marmaduke returned from his travels Sir Miles left Combe Eversleigh for the court, being called thither by the King's Grace, it was said; but in good sooth I deem that he was self-invited, for he found the old Manor, that to me was paradise, well-nigh insupportable at times. So for a whole happy year we dwelt there alone, Mistress Audrey and Muriel and I. Roger was with us often, for my dear godmother said that he was a youth of modest manners and demeanor, and she found that despite a certain love for all sports that were innocent, which belike was natural to his age, he was pious and devout at heart.

I noted that our Muriel loved better now to

listen to his tales of the great world which she had never seen than to play on her mandolin or tell her beads at our old shrine in the wood. But I could not forget the promise we had made to Marmaduke, which for me at least had more than sport in it, and so I still went thither on all the summer days. When the winds blew cold in autumn and the days grew chill, then did I bring into the house the fair statue of Our Lady, and fashion for it an altar in a closet nigh unto Muriel's chamber and mine.

Marmaduke came to us at last, taller and handsomer than ever, and withal the same brave, kindly gentleman that he had ever been. Muriel had become a graceful maiden—she had seen seventeen summers now—and he declared that in all the time since he left us he had seen no lady half so fair. Ah, me! she loved to listen to his praises; and now when rambles in the woods were on hand it sometimes chanced that there was not room for Mistress Audrey or for me. Not that our dear ones were discourteous, or showed that they wished us away; but only they had grown so happy in each other that all else was forgotten for the time. Yet once we all three wandered together as of old until we came to the bower we had built so long ago, and Marmaduke, who had been whispering softly to Muriel while I lingered behind, and was looking wondrously happy, said:

“Let us kneel here together if thou wilt, sweet-

heart; I would gladly return thanks to the great Mother of God for the gift I, so unworthy, have received to-day."

And just as in the days when we were little more than glad children, did we kneel on the moss and tell our beads at Our Lady's feet.

When we had finished, Marmaduke said:

"Once I told thee, my Muriel, that when I should come to man's estate and be able to do in small things as I listed, I would build a fair chapel here where Mass might be said and pious folk come at all times to pray. I think not this a small thing now, and belike my father may not will it. But this do I vow in thanksgiving—that if God should spare my life and give me power to do the same, before my death it shall be done. And Mass shall be said here for my father's soul and mine, and for thine, my dearest lady, and for Aunt Audrey, and for our good Cicely, who hath prayed here so oft."

Muriel, laughing, declared that she was well content, and that we would say as many prayers as Aunt Audrey when we should be as old and saintly as she. It would have grieved me sorely had another spoken of my dear mistress like this. But we forgave all things to our Muriel; partly, it may be, for that she had a grace in speech such as I have rarely known in another; and still more that we loved her so dearly it seemed that for us she could do naught amiss.

I noted that day that Marmaduke wore on his little finger a ring I had often seen with Muriel; and she begged me at night, with many blushes, to twine silk round another she showed me, for it was all too large for her tiny finger and yet might in no wise be laid aside. The next day Marmaduke set forth for London, whence shortly afterward Sir Miles returned with him to Combe Eversleigh, looking blither than had been his wont in past years, yet not without a burden of care, acquired at court belike, whence I have remarked men ever bring trouble of some kind. And it is well if the trouble hath no sin.

He said little of what he had witnessed or learned during his absence, for to speak much with us younger ones had never been habit of his; only once, when Mistress Audrey asked him at table what went on in London, he shook his head and answered gloomily that he knew of little good. And for his part he prayed God that might not go on there which would make England to become a byword and a reproach throughout the world.

Roger told me later that Sir Miles had in his mind the matter of the King's Majesty's marriage with the Queen when he said this. And when I asked in great wonder what that could be, seeing that the marriage had taken place now well-nigh twenty years ago, he answered that the King found a scruple in his mind that gave him no rest, for that he had been wedded to his brother's wife.

It was like to hinder the rest of better men than he, Roger added; and when I chided him for speaking with so little reverence of our lord the King, he said angrily:

"I hold no man in reverence, Cis, who would treat any woman as the King would treat Queen Katherine if he might. God send that some may be found who can balk him of his will. Yet as my King will I obey him while he holdeth that high place—and moreover pray God daily that he may be brought to a better mind."

That was the first I heard of the saddest story, save one, that ever men have had to tell of our once merrie England, which hath truly been a sorrowful England from that time until now.

But we at Combe Eversleigh in those days were merry enough. The cloud was in part lifted from the brow of Sir Miles; Marmaduke was at home with us, to leave no more; and although by reason of his age and much business that must needs be attended to, for Sir Miles left all things to his son, less time was spent among the trees and flowers than of yore, yet were we unspeakably happy again. I marveled somewhat that one who had traveled abroad and knew what were the gaities of great cities and the court could content himself so readily with the quiet ways of Combe Eversleigh as Marmaduke on all occasions did; and as I was with him even as a sister might have been, I once ventured to say as much.

He shook his head and answered with more sadness than I had ever seen in him before :

"I wot well, Cis, they know little about it who look upon the court as a paradise ; and ours at the present time is like to resemble the other place far more. We are well away from it, I trow, and of my own good will I would not return thither. Moreover, there is no place on earth I love like Combe Eversleigh, nor would I bide away from it long."

I said, what indeed was the truth, that Muriel was scarce of his way of thinking, for that she longed to break away from the dull country and our rustic neighbors, and to learn what life is like in the gay town.

Then came a troubled look into the eyes of Marmaduke, and he answered with a sigh :

"And there, in truth, lies my doubt, good Cicely : whether it be fair to Muriel to wed a maiden brought up here alone as she hath been, and who knows scarce any other gentleman than I. There be many, beyond doubt, more worthy of her, though none that could love her half so well, seeing that I have worshiped her ever since the day when I first beheld her in the arms of her nurse. It may be that I ought to wait until she hath had chance to learn more of the world and—and—other men. But my father's mind is set upon a speedy marriage as I never knew it set on aught before."

Now, I knew, or deemed I knew, that Muriel loved him as he loved her, in as far, that is, as it was in her nature to do; and with my whole heart I wished that they might wed, and that speedily, seeing that naught could so content Sir Miles as this, but I could not say so to him. I only bade him be of cheer, and told him how glad I was that he loved Combe Eversleigh; and he said:

“Love Combe Eversleigh? That do I, and with right good cause. Verily, Cicely, I would that Muriel loved it, too, since here we must abide when we are wed; and that in some other matters she more resembled thee.”

Whereat I felt angered, for in what was I better than a poor field daisy beside a queenly rose when Muriel was by? It was good, honest indignation thrown away, I trow, but in those days I was apt to take speeches as if the speakers must needs mean exactly what was said; than which no better proof could I give that I was young.

I think that Marmaduke spake somewhat of his doubt to Muriel that evening as they sat together on the broad window-seat and I worked at my frame hard by, for I heard her answer him half pouting as she spoke:

“Truly do I believe that thy travels have wrought thee little good, Master Marmaduke, if thou hast learned therein to misdoubt thy friends. And if in thy long wanderings thou hast met with no lady more to thy liking than mine own poor

self, wherefore, I pray thee, should I affect some other gentleman rather than thee?"

So he laughed and told us that we might soon judge of court gentlemen, since he had received news that day from an old schoolmate whom he had known both at Oxford and Eton, of a visit he would pay Combe Eversleigh. Than which, Marmaduke avowed, nothing in small matters could content him more, for that the Lord de Bletchingley was noble alike in manners and in mind; albeit he would gladly have seen his friend more attentive to his own soul's welfare, a matter too seldom thought of at court, where this same Lord de Bletchingley had tarried for the last two years.

CHAPTER V

PREPARATIONS

THE Lord de Bletchingley was the first guest of any note to whom Combe Eversleigh had thrown open her doors since our Muriel had abode with us, now getting on for fifteen years, and we made great stir at his coming. Our preparations were doubtless in part because we held him to be the friend of Marmaduke, and more methinks for that he came from high places, and we would not that before this gay court gallant our house and manners should be brought to shame. And albeit Muriel tossed her pretty head and vowed she cared not what he thought of us, yet could I, who knew her, see plainly that she cared far more than I. Mistress Audrey was careful also, and with her own hands, which were right skilful in such work, made cakes and confections that were a wonder to see.

Sir Miles appeared not to love overmuch this new beginning of things, as he called the coming of a guest to Combe Eversleigh; but my dear mistress showed him in her own sweet way how Marmaduke, when wedded, must open the house to his friends. After that he said no more, save:

“The Eversleighs have never been famous for churlishness, Audrey, until the curse came to them

with me. Let the boy bring hither whom he will. Yet would I rather that our first guest had been other than one of the race of de Bletchingley, none of whom have I or mine ever known to be other than fair and false."

To say truth, I paid little heed to these words of Sir Miles, for I was by when he spake them, because I deemed that he was apt to dislike the coming of any stranger to Eversleigh. But my brother came to the house that morning, for he too must have part in the stir, and I liked not the frown that gathered on his brow when he heard who our guest was to be. Moreover, I marveled somewhat that we should be the first to tell him this great news who was wont to hear all such things, that is, all things in which we took overmuch interest, from Marmaduke himself.

I said as much to Roger and asked if this nobleman who was to honor us had at any time offended his greatness, that he should so frown upon his coming; or whether Master Ibbetson had, peradventure, made enemies of some in high places at his grand schools.

I spoke half in jest, for it irked me somewhat when this brother of mine took airs of wisdom and seemed as though he looked down upon the simplicity and ignorance of us who knew less of the world's ways than he. But not in jest did Roger answer me.

"The Lord de Bletchingley is no enemy of mine," he said. "I pray God that Master Marmaduke may have cause to say the like."

"Certes, that hath he," said I, "for this nobleman is his friend, and was well known to him at Eton and afterward at Oxford; and Marmaduke, I know, holds the gentleman in high esteem. Yet am I bound to confess that Sir Miles appears to love him not, without giving any reasonable cause for his dislike. He says that the de Bletchingleys ever have been fair and false."

"It is true enough that Master Eversleigh knew this de Bletchingley at Eton and Oxford, Cis," my brother said gravely, "but I doubt much if he knew good of him in either place. Hast never heard of the foe my young master made at the college by giving testimony, when he could by no means avoid it, against one who had sinned against rule?"

"Yea," said I, "Marmaduke wrote somewhat of the matter to Mistress Audrey long ago. We prayed then, as he bade us, but paid little heed to the matter after that. For we looked upon it only as such a quarrel as young folks must needs have among themselves at school. Surely, Roger, this young lord, if he was in aught mixed up in that business, hath forgotten such childish work ere now."

"The scholars at Oxford be no longer children, but men, Cis," answered Roger. "And in good

truth that proved to be no boy's play to this lord; for against him, and no other, was Marmaduke's witness, but not given until he saw that one whom he knew to be innocent was like to suffer for de Bletchingley's misdeed. If the culprit hath forgiven Master Eversleigh, he hath done what, if report speaks truly, not one of his family was ever known to do before. And I would I were as well assured of his good faith at this moment as I am of Master Marmaduke's belief in it."

Then was I called away, and Roger rode to town to make purchases of sundries that we needed in preparation for this great event. But my heart was heavy and I pondered whether or not it would be well to tell Mistress Audrey what I had heard. But if I told her, what could she do? The guest was coming and must be welcomed. To speak to Muriel on such a matter were worse than useless; she loved not to anticipate evil at any time, and had already dressed up this young nobleman in her pretty thinking as a fairy prince. If Marmaduke held him as a friend, how would the loyal heart receive a hint that he was a traitor? And then I had but Roger's mind to go upon, and not one word or fact whereby the same could be proven to be true.

So I kept my own counsel, and in the pleasant summer time came to Combe Eversleigh that false Ralph de Bletchingley on whom I would to God that not one of us had ever laid eyes. But he

came, and we welcomed him, and gave him of the best of all we had; refusing nothing in our simplicity to the man who was soon to lay that fair home desolate and waste.

CHAPTER VI

THE LORD DE BLECHINGLEY

I HAVE said that we awaited in much trepidation of spirit the arrival of this young lord; that is, Muriel and I. But in one short hour after his coming we felt as much at ease with him as though he had spent a lifetime at Combe Eversleigh, and we spoke to him with as little fear as to Marmaduke, albeit with less freedom, as may be supposed. It was a gift he had brought with him from court, belike, to make all feel at home in his company.

In truth he knew the rare secret, as did the blessed Apostle in another and a holier cause, of making himself all things to all. He held grave discourse with Sir Miles touching matters of such high import as I could not even will to understand; spoke to Mistress Audrey of the wondrous virtues of Queen Katherine, the ambition of the great Cardinal, and the lightness and frivolity of the life men needs must lead at court; he questioned Marmaduke on all that pertained to field sports and woodcraft; and taught blithe tales and gay music to Muriel and me.

If Sir Miles continued to dislike his guest, he showed no token of the same, but treated him, as in duty bound, with all courtesy and kindness;

only my brother Roger held to his old opinion, and under pretext of much business contrived ever to keep himself aloof. Whereat I was somewhat angered, for I deemed such behavior to be in some sort a slighting of one who was Marmaduke's friend.

The Lord de Bletchingley had been with us a week, it may be, though the hours went by so merrily I scarce took note of how they sped, when a summons that might not be denied called Marmaduke away. Much court gossip had we learned in those days from my Lord de Bletchingley; much that caused Sir Miles to look even graver than his wont, and made Mistress Audrey turn pale with horror and amaze; while I, in my young rustic ignorance, could only marvel that such things should be. But blithe Muriel took all lightly, as though evil were something that she could not understand; and when we said farewell to Marmaduke at the gate she merrily, albeit the ready tears hung on her long lashes, bade him visit London ere his return, and bring her word whether or no Mistress Boleyn was fairer and more gracious than the Queen.

Methought that Marmaduke misliked that lightness, for he said with a gravity that became him well:

"I know not if I must needs go to London, sweetheart; but with God's help I trust ever to keep at such a distance from the Lady Anne as

will hinder my judging whether she be foul or fair. Gracious, in my eyes, could she never be."

And so, with a wide wave of his broad hat, he rode away.

Muriel's pretty brows were drawn together for full five minutes after, and she bit her lip at what sounded overmuch like rebuke. But ere we entered the house I heard her ask the Lord de Bletchingley what *he* thought of the Lady Anne; and he answered that it had been better for England, and perchance for her, had she either never left her native country, or having gone, had she never returned to it, for she had served a bad mistress in Margaret de Valois, and was like to breed trouble in the land.

And so I heard first of that evil woman who has since brought destruction on so many souls; and I pray God of His mercy that by repentance and through much suffering she may at last have saved her own. But, sooth to say, although rumors of hard usage endured by Queen Katherine reached even to Combe Eversleigh from time to time during the three weeks that followed Marmaduke's departure, I gave small thought to matters so far removed from my lowliness as the King and Queen and Mistress Boleyn by reason of troubles that to me seemed heavier than theirs, inasmuch as they threatened them whom I loved more.

For now a change came over my Lord de Bletchingley's behavior, and I marveled much that by

none of our household was it remarked save by me.

It chanced that at that time there was sickness in the village—a thing heretofore almost altogether unknown, for our churls and yeomen were a hardy race who seldom knew heavier illness than a rheum in springtime, or the misery at Yuletide that follows on overindulgence in good things. So Mistress Audrey betook herself to the stillroom and the little chamber wherein she was wont to compound medicaments for them who were in need, and we of the younger sort were left for the most part alone.

Now, to me, I must needs confess, the time passed somewhat heavily, but with my Muriel and that false de Bletchingley cheerily enough. Ah, me! It has been my lot in life since then to see much that is evil, but never have I known, as I wot well none ever could know, aught more evil than a disloyal friend. And like a foolish, simple bird, my blithe Muriel fell into the snare that was spread for her, and in bitterness of soul I could not fail to see that day by day her love for Marmaduke grew less. The false lord wooed her not in words, nor openly, but was ever and always at her side whispering into her ear tales of the gay court and its pleasures, and how if she were only transplanted thither from this desert of Eversleigh where she bloomed in the wilderness, a solitary and neglected rose, she would outshine by her tran-

scendant loveliness every high-born lady of them all.

"That is all very well, my Lord de Bletchingley," she said, laughing, on a day when he had been whispering all this and more; some things so low that I could not hear them, albeit I was seated close to Muriel, and I think not that she was desirous of concealing aught. "That is vastly well, my lord, could I only believe it. But granting it were true, which it is not, what figure could the penniless daughter of Ralph Eversleigh cut among the rich and high-born dames of whom you tell? Methinks it were better to be prized and cherished as a rose in the wilderness of Eversleigh than to be flouted and trampled on as a worthless weed by these haughty ladies at court."

Now, to my poor judgment, this answer of Muriel's seemed a wise one, wiser in good truth than much that came from her light heart. But there was a strange look, like a light half hidden, in the eyes of my Lord de Bletchingley, and methought his lip curled in scorn of her simplicity as he made reply that he could no more believe in fair Mistress Muriel showing as aught but a flower of most rare loveliness in any sphere, than he could credit her being the daughter of Ralph Eversleigh, whom all men knew to have been dead years before she was born.

Then, as though resolved to say no more, he entertained her to play on the mandolin that lay in

her lap a song he had taught her, and to sing for him in that voice the like of which he had never heard at court. So Muriel, heeding not, or seeming not to heed, the covert venom of that wily speech, tuned her pretty instrument, the gift of Marmaduke, and sang; while I sat by in bitterness of heart, resolving to speak to Mistress Audrey that evening, and blaming myself, as I well deserved, for having kept silence so long. And yet I scarce knew what I could have said until then; and Mistress Audrey hated all gossip and tale-bearing, as I had learned long since.

But when I came into her presence later in the day and would have spoken, she bade me leave her in haste, for that the sickness among the village-folk was fever, and as she had just left the bedside of a dying infant, the infection was in her garments even then. So I left her and walked upon the terrace for a space, ere I sought Muriel to warn her that we must not ramble to the village, nor hold speech with any that might come from thence for a while.

Sir Miles had sent for my Lord de Bletchingley, and told him with all courtesy of the danger that surrounded us, counseling his young guest to take horse on the instant and leave Combe Eversleigh, hoping that when the sickness should, by the mercy of God, have disappeared from among us he would so far honor our poor house as to return. All this my lord was telling Muriel when I came into the

morning room; and I noted that her cheeks were flushed and she was weeping. And that false knight went on to say:

"I may not remain the guest of Sir Miles against his will, sweet Muriel; but I will not linger from thy side one moment after I can obtain permission to return. It breaks my heart to leave my bird of sunshine in the midst of danger, slight though I hold that danger to be. But our good friend, Mistress Cicely, will do all that may be done to ward and preserve thee; and so I leave thee in God's keeping and hers."

Now, I know not, nor knew I ever, whether I was more angered at the man's shameless audacity in speaking so to a betrothed maiden, and that maiden our Muriel, or at his daring to speak so of me; but since none other was there to defend the right of the absent Marmaduke, I held most surely that the duty was mine, who had been bred up from childhood in his father's house, and for so many years had eaten of his bread.

With cheeks ablaze, I answered that of a verity we needed no stranger to remind us of our duty to Mistress Muriel, who was the ward of Sir Miles Eversleigh, and the affianced bride of his son; a fact which his guest appeared to have forgotten, but which it behooved her poor friends to remember, as they cared for her honor and that of her House. That for me I would be no longer a witness to such speech and behavior as had been his

that day; but, an he made not his farewell speedily, would away to Mistress Audrey and entreat her to come hither, for that infection of corporeal disease in any form must be better than utter disloyalty and a trust betrayed.

The man's face grew crimson. He clenched his hand as if to strike me when I first began to speak, but he grew deadly pale as I went on. There was a scornful curl on his lip and a strange light in his eye when my speech was done.

"Thou art somewhat bold for a serving-wench, mistress," he said, "and presumest overmuch on the affection of thy sweet lady, methinks. But if she can bear with thy sharp tongue and thine insolence, I know not wherefore I should complain. For the honor of this house, of which thou pratest so glibly, peradventure I know what is its true value better than thou. Thou needst not call hither Mistress Audrey at present to hear thy report, since my horse is waiting at the doorstep; and for a while at least my presence will trouble Combe Eversleigh no more. Unless, indeed," and he turned to bend over Muriel, who wept as if her heart must break, "unless, indeed, my true sovereign and the rightful lady of this place bid me stay."

"Oh, no, no; Sir Miles believes there may be danger; and not for worlds would I have thee meet Marmaduke on his return," she said, lifting her face, all tear-stained and trouble-drawn, from

her hands, whereon it had been hidden till then. "Go, Ralph, I beseech thee, and go speedily, for Cicely is in the right and—and—we—thou—art in the wrong."

"And is then all over between us, Muriel?" he said, taking in both his own the little hand which she did not even strive to withhold. "Wilt thou cast aside forever the true heart that loves thee more than aught besides, at the word of a serving-maid, and in fear of a rebuke?"

"Not so, my lord; I will be faithful ever," she made answer. "Only go now, and until I send for thee come not to Combe Eversleigh again. Listen! That is the footstep of Sir Miles in the gallery above us. Oh, Ralph, as thou lovest me, go!"

Then he kissed passionately the hand he still held, dropped it on her lap, and passed out of the chamber without more delay. I wot well there was ever something of the coward in that man. And I, who had heard no footstep in the gallery, nor knew before that Muriel could lie, turned away and stood at the window, too much amazed and sorrow-stricken for speech. Thither she came to me presently, and laid her hand upon my shoulder—the hand that Lord de Bletchingley had kissed. But my heart was filled with anger and bitterness, so that I could not bear her touch just then. As though her hand had been a serpent or other loathsome thing, I shrank away, and there

beside me she fell upon her knees and wept. How long we remained so I know not, but soon I beheld my Lord de Bletchingley galloping at full speed down the avenue, followed by his grooms. Muriel must have heard the sound of the horses' hoofs, for her sobbing ceased shortly after, and then she rose silently and left the room. Later as I sat in my chamber she came to me, opening the door and crossing the floor so lightly that I heard her not, nor knew of her presence until I felt her arm steal softly round my neck and the pressure of her warm lips upon my brow.

"Thou art angered with me, sweet Cicely," she said, "and it may be there is right on thy side; yet I can not see that it is all wrong on mine. Promise me that thou wilt say no word to Sir Miles or Mistress Audrey, but leave me to manage mine own matters in mine own way."

"Leave thee to break the heart of a true and loyal gentleman, and bring dishonor on a noble house!" I said; but Muriel's pretty lip curled, and she tossed her head.

"Oh, content thee, Cicely," she said; "the heart of Marmaduke Eversleigh will not break for me. And for the house of which thou speakest—it is like to know worse dishonor than can be brought upon it by a maiden's slighted troth. Believe me, when the tale is noised abroad in the world, as it will be, there shall be few found to blame me save thou. And who knows but thou mayst be the

gainer at last, for Marmaduke hath ever in his true heart loved thee well."

Then in passionate anger I broke forth, "Muriel, for shame!" and she hung her head for a moment as became her after making such a speech.

But this lasted not long. Her object was to win me to silence until Marmaduke's return, and when I would in no wise consent thereunto she waxed angry. "If my Lord de Bletchingley was wrong in calling thee a serving-wench, he spoke truly when he said thou dost presume. I tell thee I will not have my private matters canvassed without my consent; and I forbid thee to speak to any one whomsoever of what passed in thy presence between a noble gentleman and me."

"If the Lord de Bletchingley bears a noble name," I answered, "he hath a base and most ignoble heart; and the man who can practise on the simplicity of a country-bred maiden to betray his friend will meet with no honor from me. Neither will I be a party to treachery and deceit. Marmaduke may come at any time, as thou knowest, and early to-morrow morning will I to Mistress Audrey and tell her what hath happed, so that he may, if she think well, learn what so nearly concerns him even in the first hour of his return."

"On the first day of his return shall he learn it, Cicely, from me, so only thou wilt say naught to Aunt Audrey," pleaded Muriel. "Marmaduke is generous, and he loves me. I have no fear of him.

But, oh, I am afraid of Sir Miles, and Aunt Audrey will tell him. She loves me not as thou dost, Cicely. Only wait till Marmaduke comes home."

So she won me to promise, but it was with a heavy heart that I gave her my word. As I helped her to unrobe that night before retiring she laid her hands upon my shoulders and said:

"Thou art still angered with me, Cicely? Verily, methinks thou art unjust. Knowest thou not that Marmaduke himself said not a month ago that he doubted the fairness of wedding a maiden who had scarce known any gentleman but him? Besides, there is a reason—it may be that nearer kinship will forbid—" But this she did not finish, and I paid no heed.

Rather, she turned against him the words he had spoken out of the generosity of a noble heart; and I, weeping for the bitter trouble that was to come upon him, ended my night-service and went sadly away. The next morning she would none of my tendance, remembering and resenting my coldness of yest'reen; and so for the first time since her childhood Muriel was attired by other hands than mine.

CHAPTER VII

MARMADUKE'S RETURN

It had ever been our wont at Combe Eversleigh to sigh with regret when Marmaduke left us, and to look forward with rejoicing to his return, preparing for his coming by adorning the house with fresh flowers if it were summer time, and the making ready of some dish that he preferred, as they are like to do on such occasions whose days are for the most part unvarying in the manner of their passing, and who are glad of aught that brings a change, so only it be not a change for the worse, such as a bad harvest or a hard winter, or the advent of unwelcome news.

But now Mistress Audrey could think of naught save her sick folk and preserving from infection them that were well; Muriel sat alone in her chamber trying on her mandolin the last song she had learned from that false knight; so there was none left but me. And albeit my heart was heavy when I thought of his homecoming, and that cruel jibe of Muriel's rang ever in mine ear, yet would I not that he should lack aught of the welcome which he scarcely thought of, but would miss the more for that belike, if, for the first time, its tokens were away.

So I gathered store of fresh roses and lilies,

with pinks and lavender and sweet-scented herbs, and made the chambers as gay as I might withal, the while my heart hated the work that my hands were employed on, for the beauty of the bright blossoms seemed like a mockery of the woe that was to come.

Marmaduke never saw them, for he came not on that day, nor the next; nor indeed until many days later, when the poor flowers had long faded, as human joys and hopes are apt to do, and Muriel, grown weary of solitude and pouting, had crept to my side with fond words and caresses, and so easily won forgiveness from me who never could be wroth with her long.

A messenger from Marmaduke brought tidings that he had been called to London, where he was like to be delayed for some time on the business that had taken him from Combe Eversleigh, but that he would be with us without fail as soon as he might. The man brought, besides, a packet for Muriel, which contained a chain of finely wrought gold, fit for a lady's wearing, and a letter carefully writ and bound about with a thread of crimson silk.

"I send thee a chain such as the ladies at court are wont to wear, sweet Muriel," were the words he wrote anent the gift, "and I hope and pray that its bright links may bind me yet more closely to thy heart forever."

I was by when Muriel opened the package, and

marveled much at the glad cry she uttered as she held her pretty chain up to view.

"Read the letter, Cicely," she said; it had dropped to the floor when she rose to try the effect of her new toy. "Thou art ever quicker at such gear than I, and there is doubtless some message from Marmaduke for thee."

So I read Marmaduke's letter aloud to her—as I never could have allowed any in like case to do for me—a letter so full of tender, knightly affection as made my heart bleed while I read; and in it he bade her wear the chain to bear him in mind until his return, which he hoped shortly to compass, when he would bring her such a gift as must needs put all others far into the shade.

"Oh, Cicely, what thinkest thou it can be?" cried the thoughtless maiden. "Will he bring me jewels such as are worn by the court ladies, or mayhap such a necklace as that wherewith they say the King's Grace hath gifted Mistress Anne? Marmaduke Eversleigh is rich and generous; I ween he would grudge nothing to me."

"He will bring thee such a gift as the King hath not to bestow on her or any, else had he not sent away his lawful wife," I answered, more in sorrow than in anger, for in truth Muriel at that moment looked only like a naughty, winsome child who should scarce be held responsible for act or word; "a gift thou hast already cast aside as worthless, Muriel, and I pray God that thou mayst

not repent when it is too late; the gift of a most true and loyal heart. Seeing thou wilt none of it, I know not how thou canst accept aught else that he may bring."

Muriel's cheek flushed, and tears started to her bright eyes as she made answer: "It was never thy wont to be unkind to me, Cicely; thou art strangely altered of late."

Then she turned away and left me standing there with Marmaduke's letter in my hand.

We heard that day that, thanks to the mercy of God and the care of good nurses, the sickness in the village was abating, and soon after Mistress Audrey was among us again. But she was wearied and worn out with much anxiety and long watching by the beds of sick children—they were for the most part little ones who had been struck down—and Dame Gillian, who ever lorded it somewhat by reason of long service and knowledge of all that went on in the house, decreed that she must tarry in her chamber for some days to come, and rest. So I waited on my sweet Mistress Audrey with much comfort to myself, and some, as I verily believe, to her, and for the next three days saw but little of Muriel.

On the fourth day my good godmother declared that she would be prisoner no longer, and came to the common room to sit with us and tell of all that had chanced in the village since we had been forbidden to go thither, and who were likely to be

spared of them that were yet sick. And that same evening Marmaduke came home.

He looked wayworn and wearied, for he had ridden hard to get to us that day, and there was, moreover, a look of care upon his visage not brought by hard riding, such as I had never seen with him before, but which was nevermore to leave that noble brow until life's woes had ended, and the true heart that was doomed to suffer as I trust but few hearts do, was laid to rest. He told us that at court matters were so bad that worse could hardly be; for the King had sent away his true wife, Queen Katherine, and had been openly married to the Lady Anne; and that now for the future the palace of the sovereign would be a place wherein no true Christian might with a clear conscience willingly abide.

He said, moreover, that strange questions touching religion, and such as had never heretofore been heard of, were freely mooted at court, and much he feared that very shortly men's minds would be bewildered and few would know what to believe.

"For mine own self," he added, and I noted that in speaking he glanced quickly at Muriel, "for mine own self, now that this business is happily concluded, I trust in the good providence of God that I need travel to this evil London no more; or at least not until the devil, who seemeth now to rule, hath less power. So, to console thee, Muriel, for I know right well that thou longest to visit this

court wherein I would not for ten worlds thou shouldst set foot, I have brought thee such a robe as I trust may not displease thee—a garment which a princess need not disdain to wear——”

“A gown of sad-colored taffeta, or a black velvet fit for Queen Katherine herself, I warrant me!” cried Muriel, pouting; and in very truth, although Marmaduke had a wondrous judgment in all matters pertaining to the business of men, insomuch that the neighbors always consulted him on their woodcraft, or when horses or weapons were to be bought or sold, yet should I never have trusted him in the choice of a gown. Wherein I was proved to be entirely mistaken, as, to speak sooth, I have often been in matters of more moment since.

“But where hast thou hidden this fine garment?” said Muriel, “or wilt thou keep it in reserve till the devil hath consented to abdicate, and the court hath become a fitting place for sojourn once more?”

Methought he was pained at her light mention of what grieved him and all good men so deeply, but he answered kindly, as was ever his wont, especially with Muriel:

“Thou wilt find the robe in thy chamber, sweetheart, whither I bade them carry it when I came in. Trust me, it is neither of black velvet nor taffeta; nor needst thou, so thou wilt listen to my prayer, my Muriel, wait to wear it till thou goest

to court. Rather, I trust, so my father and Aunt Audrey be willing, to behold thee radiantly attired therein at no distant date in our chapel at Combe Eversleigh, when Father Norbert shall bless thy bridal and mine."

Muriel's face grew scarlet to the temples, and she rose hurriedly, crying:

"Then must I forthwith to my chamber, Aunt Audrey, for I long to see this gorgeous attire."

Mistress Audrey bade me go to assist Muriel in trying Marmaduke's gift, but she shook her head when I would fain have followed her, and ran lightly away, declaring that her tiring-woman should help her, for that I must not leave Marmaduke so soon.

They deemed that she spoke out of kind thought and much love for me, but I knew that she dared not accept aid from me then.

So we waited, and meanwhile Marmaduke told us much that we, or at least I, had heard only hinted at before; and he declared that to him and to many who were far wiser and of greater experience in the world's ways than he, it seemed certain that on our unhappy country the darkest of dark days were breaking now. We listened with sinking hearts to his sad forebodings, and yet we little dreamed at that time how dark those coming days would be, until the door opened suddenly and Muriel stood before us again.

Many fair sights have I seen in my long life,

have looked on many lovely ladies, some of them the noblest in the land; but never either before or afterward have I looked on aught so radiantly beautiful as was our Muriel in that wedding-gown.

It was of white silk, a wondrous fabric such as I had never seen before, interwoven throughout with threads of gold; and as she stood in the doorway, her fair cheeks crimsoned with delight and her long curls caught back with a spray of some glittering jewels, and dropped a low curtsy to show off her robe, she looked like a fairy imprisoned and wrapped round with sunbeams, that accompanied her whithersoever she moved.

"What sayest thou to my choice of a gown, Aunt Audrey?" asked Marmaduke, merrily, yet not without some touch of pride, as I could see. "And, Muriel, how likest thou thy velvet robe?"

Then Muriel suddenly stretched out both her hands toward him and sent forth a shrill and bitter cry. Sir Miles and Mistress Audrey gazed at her in astonishment, without uttering a word, and Marmaduke was all aghast, as she crossed, still with outstretched hands, to his side, and there, falling on her knees beside his chair, took both his hands in hers and, bending low above them, burst into a passion of tears. Sir Miles arose and went out of the chamber, and I, too, slipped away, deeming that for certain she was about to say to Marmaduke what would rob his heart of joy forever. I prayed for a while in anguish of spirit in

mine own chamber, and then found excuse for seeking Dame Gillian, for I could not face the others just then. My heart was sick and faint with fear.

So I lingered until supper and then crept quietly into the hall, where I found Muriel, with swollen eyes and pale cheeks, seated between Mistress Audrey and Marmaduke, who were soothing and caressing her as though she were a frightened child.

CHAPTER VIII

CONSEQUENCES

WE lingered not long in the hall after supper that night, for the brow of Sir Miles was overclouded, Marmaduke was wearied by his journey, and Dame Gillian would have Mistress Audrey retire early to rest. So we said prayers betimes and went each to his chamber after all had spoken a kindly good-night, as was our wont. I noted that Marmaduke kissed Muriel's hand, as she stood before him, with a courtesy and tenderness which none might surpass, and that my dear Mistress Audrey looked inquiringly into the child's eyes when she said her good-night. But Muriel's face was averted, and she saw not, or, as it seemed to me, she would not see, how much they were grieved for her.

Only when we had reached her chamber, into which she would allow no other to come with her that evening but me, she threw her arms about my neck as she had so often done in the old, happy times when she was a child, and began to weep so bitterly that I could not bear to see her grief. And yet what could I say or do to help her who had made her own undoing, and who had wrought such sorrow for all them who loved her more even than themselves? I kissed her, for in truth I, too, loved

her with a love that hath not faded even yet, after more than sixty years, and soothed her as best I might, bidding her be of better cheer and praying her to invoke the help of God's Mother and ours in this hour of her distress. But she only clung to me more closely and shivered as she cried :

"Oh, Cicely, I am afraid of Marmaduke as I never was before! Didst thou not see how stern was his face and how white his lips when he spoke of the King's Grace and Queen Katherine, and how wrathfully he spoke of her whom he called a light-o'-love—the King's new wife, Lady Anne? I dare not speak to him of Ralph, Cicely. I knew not that he loved me so until now."

"Marmaduke Eversleigh will force no one's love," I said, speaking somewhat coldly, for I was vexed that she seemed as far from penitence as ever, and I had been led to hope something by her tears. "Tell him fairly to-morrow that thou art troth-plight to another, and though his heart may break, Muriel, he will forgive the wrong thou hast done him and strive to make thy peace with Sir Miles."

"He will be terribly wroth with Ralph de Bletchingley. Cicely, oh, Cicely! thinkest thou that he will slay him outright?"

Now, at this I lost patience, in spite of her distress, and answered more roughly than I had ever spoken to her before.

"And if he did, methinks it were scarce more

than he deserves who could take advantage of a friend's trust in him to ruin his happiness forever. And I marvel, Muriel, that all thy thoughts are for the false lord whose treachery hath wrought this trouble, rather than for the true friends who have loved and cared for thee so long."

At this she wept and clung to me more closely than ever, declaring that she loved all and every one of us, and that the Lord de Bletchingley had sore injustice at my hands, as some day I should doubtless learn.

"But Marmaduke hath ever been good to me," she said, "and now he hath brought this fair dress from London and wills that I should wed him in it—and that, thou knowest, Cicely, I can not do. Oh, why did he bring hither the Lord de Bletchingley? We were all so happy before he came!"

And herein for the first time in many days we were agreed, so I strove once more to soothe her, and to win from her a promise that on the morrow she would speak, and no longer deceive them who surely had a right to learn what so closely concerned them and the honor of the house.

It was long ere I persuaded her, for a fear of Marmaduke had seized her, and she declared she could never tell him what she had done. Then I bade her tell her tale to Mistress Audrey, but of this course she would not even hear.

The night had worn toward morning ere she promised to speak to Marmaduke as soon as might

be on the morrow, and then she would by no means consent that I should leave her, so I drew a couch to her bedside and lay down there, and holding my hand she fell asleep; as I could not do, who lay awake listening to her sobbing even in her slumber, till day broke, when I, too, fell into a dreamless sleep.

The sun was high in the heavens when I awoke and looked for Muriel and found to my surprise that she had risen while I slept. Neither was she in the hall when I descended, and her maid Joan declared that her mistress had wandered forth into the park an hour ago in spite of the rain that was falling, saying that she stifled in the house for want of air. She came in presently, looking pale and wearied, with her long hair all damp from the rain.

A silent company were we at breakfast that day, and the meal was scarce ended when Marmaduke affirmed that he must go to Master Walters and Roger that he might tell them of his success in the business he had been transacting, and learn how things had gone while he was away. Muriel sat with head averted and would not see the glance wherewith I besought her to remember her promise and speak with him ere he should leave the house.

So forth he went into the park, and we sat together in silence, Mistress Audrey, Muriel, and I, for the short space of half an hour, it may be, when we heard his footstep in the corridor.

In a moment the door was thrown open, and, looking as I had never seen him, Marmaduke came in. His brows were drawn together, his face, even to his lips, was pale, and there was a sternness in his aspect and a flash in his eyes, albeit he strove hard to keep his wrath under control, that made me tremble and turn faint with fear of what might come. In his hand he held what looked like his own letter, a missive writ upon fair white paper and tied with a thread of crimson silk.

Muriel caught sight of it as though by instinct, and straightway arose, putting forth her hands toward Marmaduke as if she feared that he might slay or harm her in some way where she stood. He held the letter toward her and spoke in a voice that sounded not like his.

"I met a messenger in the park but now, my cousin," he said, and never had I heard him call Muriel cousin in that way before, "who rendered into my keeping this missive bearing your name. I pray you tell me that it could never have been intended for you."

Muriel made no answer for a moment, but stood like a statue of stone before him, and her face, like his, was white and set; only hers was the paleness of fear.

Then Mistress Audrey arose and holding out her hand as though for the missive, she said:

"If that paper bears the name of Muriel, Marmaduke, methinks that I, who hold the place of

her mother, have the best right to know what it may be."

"It is a letter bearing the superscription 'To Mistress Muriel Eversleigh,' Aunt Audrey, in the hand of the Lord de Bletchingley, who was of late our guest."

"And if that indeed be so, I marvel not at thine anger, Marmaduke," said my sweet lady, and she laid her hand tenderly on Muriel's shoulder, as though to shield her as she spoke. "But thou shouldst know that with this impertinence our Muriel can have naught to do. Thou hast frightened the child. Speak to Marmaduke, little one, and assure him that this is the first thou hast heard of the Lord de Bletchingley's pursuit."

But Muriel answered nothing, only dropped into the seat behind her, laid her face upon her hands, and sobbed.

Then Marmaduke spoke sternly again.

"Fain would I believe that all is as thou sayest, Aunt Audrey, but the fellow who brought this token from my honorable friend avowed whilst handing it into the keeping of the footboy Giles that he should have been at the place appointed an hour and more ago, in time to meet the lady herself, but that an untoward accident detained him on the way. Lift up thy face, I pray thee, Mistress Muriel, and tell us if his tale be true."

There was bitter anger in his tone as he spake those words to Muriel, such as I never could have

believed it was in Marmaduke to use; above all to her, our Muriel, who throughout her life had always been so petted and caressed.

Methinks it must have aroused a like spirit in her for a moment, for she, too, was an Eversleigh, since she rose once more to her feet and lifted her head proudly as she made reply.

"The tale is true in so far that I looked for a letter from my Lord de Bletchingley, and expected that a sure messenger would deliver it into mine own hand. Hadst thou not been in so great a hurry to go out this morning, Marmaduke, thou mightst have learned as much from me, as Cicely may bear witness if she will."

"Cicely!" cried Marmaduke, and even then I was proud to see the surprise that was writ upon his face. "Cicely! Now, I beseech thee, tell me not that thou hast been a partner in this shameful business, if thou wouldst not have me lose all faith in human truth."

"I will answer for Cicely," said Mistress Audrey, whose sweet face was deadly pale, "that she hath done naught unbecoming a modest maiden, nor transgressed against the fidelity that she owes our house. And now, Muriel, tell thy story, if there is aught that thou wouldst say, ere I bring my brother, thy guardian. Or wouldst thou rather that he came here at once?"

The hot blood rushed in a crimson flood to Muriel's cheek and brow, and she rested one hand

on the back of her carved seat as, still standing, she said:

"I will speak to you and Marmaduke, Aunt Audrey. Cicely, who hath throughout been blameless, knows all I have to say. I am troth-plight to the Lord de Bletchingley, and for that reason hath he written to me to-day. And I see not that I am so much to blame in this matter, since even my Cousin Marmaduke, who hath ever been better to me than I deserve, said that it was scarce fair to ask a country-bred maiden to wed with the only gentleman she hath known."

Mistress Audrey sank upon a chair with a low cry of bitter agony. Marmaduke could not trust himself to speak. He threw upon a table the letter, which all this time he had held in his hand, and turning, strode out of the room. I strove to recover Mistress Audrey, who had swooned, knowing, I ween, better than we what misery was to come; and Muriel sat weeping with her face hidden in her hands.

Above us in the gallery where he often loved to walk for hours, I could hear the footfall of Sir Miles, and each sound seemed to fall upon my heart. Presently Mistress Audrey began to revive, and even as she unclosed her eyes the door opened and Marmaduke came in. He went straight to Muriel and spoke very gently and low.

"I crave thy pardon, my cousin," he said, "for speaking to thee as none should speak to a lady but

now. Thou didst well to remind me of mine own speech, sweet Muriel, and I confess that I have been unjust. I go now to speak with my father; pray thou that he may see things in the same light as I."

And so he left us once more. We heard his step as he ascended the stone stairs to the gallery; and his father's footfall cease. Then followed a silence which I seemed to feel; then the sound of voices speaking more loudly than the custom is in common talk; and then a cry as of a soul in agony and a heavy fall.

Mistress Audrey arose.

"The sin hath found us out," she said. "Wretched child, thou hast slain him by thy miserable folly. Stay with her, Cicely."

So she left us alone. Muriel seemed not to have heard, but sat there sobbing, and presently I heard Marmaduke's voice calling for Robin, his groom, who forthwith saddled the swiftest horse in the stables and galloped away. Then did Mistress Audrey send Dame Gillian to me with a message that Sir Miles had been stricken down by a fit, and that the leech and Father Norbert had been sent for, and she prayed me to entreat God of His mercy to spare her brother till they should come.

I turned to Muriel when I heard, to ask her to come with me to the oratory, and saw that she had fainted at the news, her strength, I ween, over-spent by all she had gone through.

It was long ere she recovered, and when I had undressed her and laid her in her bed she held my hand and would in no wise let me go. I heard the sound of horses' hoofs in the avenue and longed to know if the priest and the physician had arrived. At last Joan told me they were there.

So the long, sad hours passed away. All the house was in confusion, the servants stood about in groups weeping and wondering, and I felt that unless I might go forth and learn something of the truth I must go wild. And all this time Muriel was dozing, and moaned when I tried to loose my hand. At last she awoke from her troubled slumber, and after looking wildly about her for a moment asked if Mistress Audrey had taken the fever, or what was the matter in the house. Then she remembered somewhat and began anew to weep, declaring that Sir Miles was dead, and that she by her misdeeds had slain him, and demanding to be told the time of his decease.

When, with much ado, I had convinced her that Sir Miles was still living, albeit I feared that he was sick unto death (but this I said not to Muriel for fear of increasing her fright and remorse), she rose from her bed and would go down to the room wherein we were wont to sit together with spinning-wheel and embroidery, there to await such tidings as Dame Gillian, or mayhap, presently, Mistress Audrey, might bring.

There were we told by Roger, who had come up

from the house of Master Walters, that Sir Miles had been stricken in the gallery with a seizure so terrible that it was feared on all hands that he must die. He had fallen to the ground while speaking with Marmaduke, with blood streaming from his mouth, having broken a blood-vessel in his head; and that since then he had been insensible, and could not be got to notice Father Norbert, who had come immediately on learning of his sad plight, nor Mistress Audrey, nor his son.

So passed the remainder of that terrible day wherein we sat alone in the great chamber, Muriel and I, longing for some one to come to us with tidings, and seeing only Dame Gillian or the serving-wench, who were all half dead with terror and affright.

When night fell we crept up to Muriel's chamber, and once more I lay down on the couch by her side. The poor child was wearied well-nigh to death by so much sorrow, she who in all her life had known no sorrow before. Therefore she slept. But I lay awake until morning, listening for every sound, and only longing that I might creep to the door of Sir Miles's chamber, that so perchance I might learn how he fared. But I dared not leave Muriel, who never once loosed her hold of my hand. And right glad was I when the first rays of the sun looked in at the window, giving me excuse to rise.

CHAPTER IX

DEATH IN THE HOUSE

MUCH could I write of the misery of the days that followed ere the great change came, days that seemed to stretch into weeks and ages, albeit in reality they were only two. But who of them that shall read this can be ignorant of sorrow? or how could he understand what I must write if he were?

During these two days we saw Mistress Audrey but seldom, and Marmaduke not at all. Roger was always in the house, and sometimes in the sick chamber, where I, above all things, longed to be. But Roger shook his head when I asked if I might not be of use there, and declared that it was no place for such as I; and Muriel would not allow me to go for more than a moment from her side.

Dame Gillian came to us now and then, sent as I believed by Mistress Audrey, who never forgot the sufferings of others, no matter what her own might be, and told us that Sir Miles grew worse instead of better and lay as one already dead, save that he breathed heavily, and once had moved uneasily when that weary bleeding had come on again.

He could in no wise be made to recognize any who were about him, and Father Norbert and Mistress Audrey had spent almost the whole night upon their knees, entreating the Father of mercies

that this poor soul might not be called away without some moment of consciousness allowed wherein to make his peace with God. And Dame Gillian bade us, too, fall to our prayers. Right glad was I that at last there was something I could do, though in truth I had not ceased to pray from the moment when I heard him fall in the gallery the day before. Now I strove to induce Muriel to join with me in saying the beads of Our Lady, but she seemed too grief-stricken to pray.

On the second morning, when we were well-nigh worn out with weariness and watching, Dame Gillian brought tidings that our prayers had been granted in so far that the senses of the sick man had returned. He opened his eyes and looked about him even as Father Norbert was saying the holy Mass in the oratory, and we heard the good news as we came out. I remember thinking in a half dreamy way of the legend Marmaduke had told us in the wood in that glad time that seemed to me centuries ago, and wondering whether, if the Holy Sacrifice were to be offered with that intention every day, those old happy days might be brought back.

Methinks I was but half conscious of aught that went on around me that day, when everything seemed dim and distant, and nothing really alive except the dumb sorrow that hung over the house. Toward evening I was seated with Muriel in the great chamber passing my beads slowly through

my fingers, though in truth I scarce knew what prayers I said. Father Norbert had spent many hours alone with Sir Miles. Mistress Audrey had been lying in her chamber worn out by the long vigils she had kept; and Marmaduke had been, I know not whither, only we had not seen him all the day. But now toward sunset the door opened slowly and he came in. Ah, me! but he was changed. His cheeks were sunken, and in color of an ashen gray; his eyes had fallen far back into their sockets, and his hair was streaked with threads of white. His voice when he spoke appeared to come from afar, and his form was bent as if with age.

He spoke to Muriel.

"I am sent by Sir Miles Eversleigh, Muriel," he said, "to entreat that thou wilt come to his chamber, which in a few hours will be the chamber of death, that whilst time yet remains to him he may make tardy reparation for a grievous wrong that hath been done."

Muriel rose, and her lips moved as if she would have answered, but could not, and Marmaduke went on:

"If what I ask in his name seems too painful, let me entreat you to consider that he who makes the request is on his death-bed, and not to send one who hath sinned grievously against you and against his trust to meet his Judge, who will be yours, unforgiven."

"Tell him I forgive all and everything wherein he may have wronged me," gasped Muriel, "but, oh, Marmaduke, ask me not to go there. I have never seen a human creature die. Let me stay here and pray for him, I beseech thee! Oh, Marmaduke, I am sore afraid."

She spoke to him appealingly, as she had ever been wont to do when in trouble of any sort, and forgot that in aught she had wronged him, as I verily believe. Perhaps for the moment he forgot it, too.

"It is hard for thee, Muriel, as I well believe," he said gently, "but bethink thee, sweet one, that thou canst smooth the passage into eternity of a most suffering soul. Our good Cicely will come with thee; Aunt Audrey and Father Norbert will be there. We must all go by this awful road at some time, and when thine own hour shall come thou wilt face it the more readily for having done this act of mercy now."

I think not that she understood what he said to her, but only that he would in no wise consent that she should not do as he would. So she took his arm, and he led her through the corridors and up the stairs, I following as best I might and feeling scarce able to stand. I saw some of them of the household going before us by cross passages, and when we reached the door of the chamber many had to move aside to give us way, for all the servants, with Father Norbert, old Master Walters,

and my Roger, were assembled there. I would fain have rested in the doorway, but Marmaduke said, "Come, Cicely," and Muriel seized my hand, so I followed them into the death-chamber even as I would, had need been, have followed those two to death.

And an awful sight I saw there—a sight that but too often comes back to me even now.

There lay Sir Miles, propped up by pillows, his face ghastly in its deadly pallor, and looking all the more deathlike from contrast with his thick black beard. I should never have known him, his aspect was so wofully changed. Father Norbert stood at the head of the bed, praying silently as I could see, and on the other side knelt my sweet lady, with her face buried in the pillows; but my heart stood still as I looked upon her, for in those three terrible days her beautiful brown hair had turned white.

I know not how I took such intimate note of the aspect of that chamber, when my blood was freezing with the terror always felt, as I believe, by the young when they face death for the first time; but so it was. I saw, too, a little table standing by the bed, whereon were disposed a cloth of fair white linen, with a crucifix, two wax candles, and a vessel holding holy water and a sprig of box. All about on their knees were the servants of the household, and even the footboys and grooms; all with their faces covered, and many

striving to stifle the sobbing that would not be controlled, called forth scarcely so much by grief for their dying master as by the awful presence of death.

Silently they made way for Marmaduke and Muriel and me, who felt strangely out of place, yet was forced to go forward until I stood close beside the dying man.

Muriel trembled so that Marmaduke was compelled to put his arm about her to prevent her from falling, and as they stood there together I could not help thinking how different all things might have been but for that false de Bletchingley. Father Norbert bent above Sir Miles and whispered softly, and the sick man opened his eyes and looked at Muriel and his son, but only for an instant; then he shuddered and closed them again. Once more Father Norbert bent over him and whispered something—methinks an exhortation to forgiveness—in his ear. Then he looked at them again and spoke to Muriel, who drew back in terror and leaned against Marmaduke, as I could see, in mortal fear.

“So, child, thou art afraid of me,” said Sir Miles, “or shrinkest thou from the aspect of death, which is so near? It will come nearer to thee some day than it is now. Give me thy hand.”

She made no movement or sign to show that she had heard, and Marmaduke lifted her hand and

laid it in the feeble grasp of the sick man. He strove to draw her nearer and went on:

"I call all here present to witness that I, Sir Miles Eversleigh, have, for the last sixteen years, done foul wrong to the child of my dead brother Marmaduke, Muriel, the true heiress of Eversleigh, by withholding from her the lands which are her own. I beseech her to forgive the injustice I have done her, as she hopes to win pardon for her own sins from Jesus Christ the Judge—and—" here he spoke with great effort and methought a new shudder passed over his frame—"as freely as I forgive her the wrong that she hath done to me and mine."

He sank back exhausted, but still retained his hold on Muriel's hand.

She neither spoke nor moved, but remained with her face hidden on the shoulder of Marmaduke, who looked as if he must sink to the earth but for his care for her, so terrible to his noble soul was the shame of that confession of disgrace and sin. Then Father Norbert spoke aloud, and never had I heard his voice so stern before.

"Answer thy guardian as beseems thee, Mistress Muriel," he said, "and refuse not to grant the prayer of a dying man."

Then I felt angry for Muriel, who certes had no thought of refusing forgiveness, but only was too terrified to speak. Marmaduke whispered to her softly, and she raised her head and glanced around

as though she had only just awakened from a trance. Her hand was still in that of her uncle, and moving forward a step, she bent over his pillow and imprinted a kiss upon his brow.

"Dost thou forgive me?" he whispered, and she answered, "I forgive thee, my uncle." Then suddenly clasping his hand with both her own, she sank upon her knees at the bedside and cried aloud:

"Oh, canst thou ever forgive me the wrong I have done thee? It is I who should ask pardon—not thou."

With a mighty effort Sir Miles laid his hand upon her bowed head and made answer:

"Nay; we both need forgiveness. I am punished for my sin. May God bless thee!"

He sank back among the pillows, and to my horror I saw a thin stream of blood flowing from his mouth. Muriel did not stir, so Marmaduke wiped the red drops from his father's lips, and Father Norbert, who was vested in surplice and stole, began to pray, in a low voice, yet so as to be heard of those who knelt around, for seeing what was coming, I, too, had fallen upon my knees.

That solemn act of forgiveness had been made in preparation for the Holy Viaticum which Sir Miles was to receive in presence of us all.

Marmaduke raised the sick man in his arms, and while Father Norbert held before him the blessed body of the Lord, I wot we prayed fervently

and well. The hands of Sir Miles had been joined for a moment, but the right slipped down as his son supported him, and, whether by accident or design I know not, rested again on Muriel's head. So after all those years spent at enmity with the God who created him, Sir Miles once more and for the last time received the body of his Lord. God grant that it may have profited him unto eternal life!

And then there was silence in the chamber save for a half-uttered sob that broke forth now and then. At last I thought of Muriel and touched her shoulder, but her head fell helplessly upon my hand and I knew that she had swooned. Roger was watching, in fear, as he afterward told me, that my strength would give way, for he deemed that I had been sorely tried and that in that solemn hour none other would think of me. He came now, and lifting Muriel as though she were a baby, carried her away. I followed him to her chamber, where, without one word, he laid her on the bed, and only saying, "I must go back to Sir Miles; I pray thee, for my sake, Cicely, have some care for thyself," he departed straightway. Then I, seeing how she who had been the light of the house had come to be hated and despised among us, could not find it in my heart to arouse her from that merciful swoon. But kneeling beside the bed on which she lay, I wept bitterly and strove to pray.

CHAPTER X

A FUNERAL

PRESENTLY I slept uneasily, with my head resting on Muriel's skirt on the bed, and was dreaming that Father Norbert had accused and was for trying her for the murder of Sir Miles, when I felt a light touch on my shoulder, and heard a voice that seemed part of my dream, saying: "Cicely, look up, and speak to me; knowest thou not that Muriel hath swooned?"

Raising my head, I made answer: "And it is better even so. Let her rest, not knowing of her misery, and how no friend is left to her but me." And so was for lying down again.

But it was Mistress Audrey who had spoken, only in my state of drowsiness I knew it not, and she touched me gently again.

"I grieve to have to waken thee, poor child," she said, "but presently thou shalt sleep if thou canst. It is I, thy godmother, Cicely! Rouse up until I tell thee what hath happened."

Then indeed I awoke in much shame and confusion, and Mistress Audrey went on:

"My brother hath passed to a better world, as I trust, my Cicely. Thou wilt pray for his soul, I doubt not, remembering that he hath ever been

good kinsman and kind master to thee. Now must we do what we can for Muriel."

Forgetful of her own weariness and great sorrow, Mistress Audrey applied herself to preparing a cordial for Muriel, and in time she shuddered as in terror and opened her eyes. My dear lady spake to her gently, and gave her a soothing draught ere she had called back her thoughts, and soon the poor child was sleeping in peaceful forgetfulness that there was either death or sorrow in the world. I helped to undress her, and then Mistress Audrey made me lie down beside her. Ere long I, too, fell asleep.

Now, how the next few days passed I know not, save that Muriel lived in a mortal terror, and kept me ever at her side. She feared to go even to the chapel, because to do so we must pass the chamber wherein lay all that was left on earth of Sir Miles. Mistress Audrey was busied about many matters and came to us but seldom when once satisfied that Muriel was not suffering in health. Marmaduke we saw not; but once, while Muriel was sleeping, I left her chamber and ventured through the corridors to the chamber of Sir Miles to see if peradventure I might say a prayer beside one who, as my godmother had said, had ever been good kinsman and kind master to me. As I was wondering how I might gain access to the death-chamber I met Dame Gillian, and she bade me go on and

enter without fear, for that she had persuaded Mistress Audrey to seek some rest for a while, and that none were there excepting two good Brothers from the monastery two miles off, and Sir Marmaduke, at prayer.

In that hour of distress, when I paid little heed to most that passed around me, it seemed strange to hear Marmaduke called by the title that had so long been borne by him who was no more, and being still half-dreamy and dazed, as it were, I walked on, marveling stupidly wherefore Dame Gillian had done this thing. So I entered the chamber. There lay the body of him whom scarce a week ago I had seen and spoken with when he looked as hale and strong, albeit not so young, as I. A pall of black velvet embroidered with silver was spread over the bed, but the outlines of what lay beneath showed clear and sharp, and the awful stillness of that presence made me shrink. The Brothers knelt on either side of a tall crucifix at the bed's foot, and close beside the pillow, on the very spot where I had seen Mistress Audrey on the day before, knelt Marmaduke, so motionless and rigid that for a moment I feared he, too, had passed away.

I knelt there by the door and prayed with my poor strength for the soul of him who had left us, and for those who, suffering for him and through his sin, were left behind. But presently the maiden

Joan crept up on tiptoe, with fear-distended eyes, and whispered that Muriel was awake and calling for me.

I arose and was going, when Marmaduke, who I thought knew not I was there, stood up and came forward before I could well get away. He said no word, but took my half-unwilling hand and led me to where he had been kneeling, and there turned back the black covering from the face of the dead.

How beautiful and calm it was! The sweet majesty of death had settled on his features, bringing back to cheek and brow the grace of kindness and strength of which I had heard them speak who had known him long ago before his sin, but which I had never seen in him till now. It made him look like Marmaduke, who, changed by sorrow and suffering and disgrace, although his face could never lose its nobleness, looked all unlike himself.

"I thank thee, good Cicely; thou wilt pray for him?" he said, and so led me to the door again. Sobbing aloud as I passed down the corridor, I went back to Muriel.

There was a quiet funeral at Eversleigh, quieter than ever had been known when a lord of the Manor was borne to his last home. It was better so. Marmaduke could scarce have faced a concourse of neighbors, and the story of Sir Miles's deed had gone abroad; for not death itself can prevent the spreading of a scandalous tale. In life

he had held aloof from those who dwelt around him, and they held aloof from him now. What mattered it to him?

Father Norbert sang the Mass in the chapel, assisted by the monks; Mistress Audrey, Marmaduke, and them of the household, with Master Walters and Roger, followed him to the grave. Muriel would not go; she was afraid, and clung to me, shivering and sobbing and declaring that she had been the cause of his death. When all was over she came to the great chamber and sat down to her embroidery frame, but she seemed to shrink from every one, and it angered me to see that all except Marmaduke, even my sweet Mistress Audrey, shrank from her. I feared that my bright blossom had been blighted forever and that I should never see her comforted again.

I was wrong. On the day after the funeral she went about the house as usual, only that she would not pass the chamber of Sir Miles; and at the end of a week I heard her singing softly in the garden, but the air she sang was not that which she had learned from that false lord.

Then came long closetings of Marmaduke with a lawyer, for it seemed that much business must be done, and Mistress Audrey drooped daily and wept sadly when she thought that there were none to see her. She told me that Muriel was now the rightful owner of Eversleigh, and that Marmaduke could no longer live in the old house. Briefly,

too, she told me the tale of the wrong that had been done. When the first Marmaduke Eversleigh left his home in anger, he had quarreled with his father because of a fair maiden whom he had seen in his travels, and whom he was determined he would wed. He was well-nigh penniless, but with much ado obtained employment of some kind and found a home whereto he took his bride. And there, under another name, he lived with her until she drooped and faded, and he took her to Italy in hope of saving her life. But she died there, leaving of several children only one, our little Muriel. The others had gone before her to heaven. When Muriel was scarce three years old her father feared that he must soon follow the wife whom he loved, and in despair for his little one sent to his brother in England, begging him to come to him, but without telling him for what he needed his presence; and then it was Sir Miles left his home, not telling even his sister whither he went. He found Marmaduke at the point of death; but he lived long enough to confide his daughter to the care of his brother, and to beg him to look after the child's interests as if she were his own. And this Miles promised to do.

But during the homeward journey other thoughts came into his mind. For seven years had he been Sir Miles Eversleigh of Combe Eversleigh, and all that time his son had been regarded as the heir. The little maid who had appeared so un-

expectedly could not inherit the title, and what would that be worth to the boy without money or lands? But if he wedded his cousin when the child should be upgrown (and she promised to become a fair and winsome maiden), then none need be the wiser. When that time came, as he hinted to Mistress Audrey, dispensation from the impediment of consanguinity might be procured. So murmured the tempter in the ear of the proud man who could not bear the thought of coming down from the place that he had believed to be his own, for the sake of a mere babe. And Sir Miles Eversleigh listened and fell.

For well-nigh sixteen years the things of earth had gone well with him, to the peril of his immortal soul; and then the Lord de Bletchingley came to Eversleigh and played a game of treachery worse than his had been. Sir Miles saw the plans that had prospered so long destroyed in a moment, and the knowledge brought death.

Now Marmaduke was left almost as penniless as Muriel had been, for Sir Miles had spent more than his own in improving Combe Eversleigh, and in providing the most costly education that could be obtained for his son. All this Mistress Audrey told me weeping. "And," she said, "it was as well, for seldom did good come of marriages in which man and maid were so close relatives." She told me, too, that Marmaduke must go forth into the world to make a fortune; and since an

honest man and good Christian might scarce be sure of his life in a court such as ours was like to become, she feared that naught remained to him but to journey over the sea, and take service in France or the Netherlands, or, if the name of Englishman had not become hateful to him, in the army of King Charles of Spain. As next of kin, Marmaduke had become Muriel's guardian by his father's death, and had besought Mistress Audrey to dwell with her at Eversleigh and to be a mother to the maiden as she had ever been. My godmother consented thereto. Master Walters had already declared that he would have naught to do with the land now that it had changed masters, so Roger had agreed to take his place, as indeed had been intended when my brother first came to Eversleigh.

While Mistress Audrey and I sat and talked over our work in the great chamber, Muriel wandered in the garden among the fast-fading flowers, for the summer was well-nigh over now; and Marmaduke sat alone writing or studying in the book-room. For them who had loved it so dearly, joy and happiness had fled from Combe Eversleigh forever.

CHAPTER XI

THE PROMISE MADE

So the weeks passed slowly away until all things had been set in order by Master Walters and Marmaduke, and my Roger was installed in his new office of land-steward, which was scarcely new to him, inasmuch as he had for many months been doing all things which of old Master Walters had been wont to do.

I knew that when the year of mourning should have ended Roger would wed with the granddaughter of his old master, than whom a comelier maiden or more thrifty housewife could not be found, and all who knew them were well pleased with the match. John Walters had married a young Breton girl who had once lived with Mistress Audrey as her maid, and had inherited land from her father; and being somewhat of a roving disposition in his youth, had traveled to that far country—it seemed a far country to me who had seldom gone beyond Combe Eversleigh since my first coming thereto—and there lived with her for many years. But when she died he sent his one daughter to England that she might learn the language and manners of his own land, and she had abode with her grandsire, Master Walters, who loved her as if she had been his own, as indeed she was.

He was well satisfied that she should wed with Roger, whom he knew so well. Her own lands in Brittany were in care of her father until his death, when they were taken by a kinsman of the family, who sent the rents thereof to Master Walters for his granddaughter Alix, whom we of Combe Eversleigh called Alison, as being a name more familiar to our tongues. Marmaduke would fain have had Roger marry at once, but of this neither he nor Alison would hear. Then Marmaduke left Combe Eversleigh for a while to visit some who had interest and good will to advance his fortunes, and during the three weeks of his absence Mistress Audrey and I could do little else save think and speak of him and pray for his success.

It scarcely seemed that Muriel well understood that Marmaduke must leave the home which for so many years he and all others had looked upon as his own, and my good mistress seldom spoke before her of aught that concerned any save herself. And during those weeks neither I nor any one at Combe Eversleigh heard aught of the Lord de Bletchingley, though I deem not that he was forgotten by any of us, and by Muriel least of all. She was gentle and loving, more so than she had ever been, and sure am I that by Marmaduke and myself she was loved as truly and well as in the days of her blithe childhood, when her winning ways and wondrous beauty had brought joy and glee to the old place. Mistress Audrey was kind

as ever, and watchful over the child's well-being as of old, but there was no longer the softness in her tone, nor the tenderness in her smile, which we had been wont to look for in her intercourse with Muriel. Right glad was I when she told me that Marmaduke had writ a letter to Roger wherein he spake of his immediate return, and I hoped against hope that Providence might have arranged that he should stay with us at Combe Eversleigh, not seeing in my young ignorance how it was that this could never be.

When he came he told us that he had been fortunate beyond what he had hoped for, inasmuch as he had obtained a place in the household of the Countess of Salisbury, a most noble lady and near of kin to the King's Grace, but not likely to visit the court by reason of her great age and frequent infirmities, and the small favor with which she was regarded since the new marriage with Mistress Boleyn, whom she would by no means acknowledge as Queen.

"I see not much hope of advancement for him here," said Mistress Audrey when he had gone out from the chamber after telling us this; "but the court is closed to all good men and true, and worse is to come. In truth, my Cicely, these be hard times for Eversleigh."

"And wherefore need he leave us at all?" asked Muriel, albeit her cheek reddened as she spoke; "hath my Cousin Marmaduke to learn that there

is a home for him here as of old as long as he will do us the grace to abide in it? I wot well that had the place been his as it is mine, I had scarce been suffered to depart."

"Thou art a child, Muriel," said Mistress Audrey. "Wouldst thou have Sir Marmaduke Eversleigh remain to be a dependant on the bounty of the Lord de Bletchingley in the Hall that was so long held to be his?"

It was the hardest and most bitter speech that ever fell from those gentle lips, I ween, and when she had spoken Mistress Audrey straightway arose and left the room. Muriel bit her lip till her pearly teeth were stained with blood, and walked to the window without a word. She stood there for some minutes, then sank upon her knees and, resting her head on her arms upon the broad window-seat, she wept bitterly and long.

Marmaduke came in when her tears were dried, and told us that the time of his stay with us must be short, and that if it pleased us he would gladly walk with us once more through the woods in which we had spent so many pleasant holidays in the years that were by. So we went forth with him as of old—but, ah, how differently! He gave Muriel his arm without even glancing at her tear-stained face, and yet I wot well he knew she had been weeping. We spoke little, for our hearts were too full for speech, only now and then Marmaduke strove to say somewhat that might cheer

us, and affected to look forward with pleasure to all that he was soon to see in the great world.

"And sometimes while I am away my two sweet sisters will come to our woodland shrine and pray for me as of old," he said; "who knows but that if I should fall into prison or be bound in irons as was that crusading knight of whom we used to tell, I may be released from cell and fetter by the prayers of the fair maidens at home."

His voice faltered, though he strove to speak lightly; for he thought, I ween, of the day when he had asked Muriel if she could be constant as the lady in the tale, and she had answered with all confidence that she could. Perhaps she too remembered, for she hung down her head; and so we came to Our Lady's image and knelt for a few moments to pray.

When we rose Marmaduke said:

"Think not for one moment I regret that the home of our fathers hath passed into hands so fair, my sweet Cousin Muriel; not for worlds would I have things otherwise if I might. Thou wilt do more for Combe Eversleigh than I ever could. Yet would I fain have builded here the chapel that we dreamed of, according to my vow."

"Thy chapel shall be builded, Cousin Marmaduke," cried Muriel, raising her head for the first time since we came out; "and fitting is it that I rather than thou should be the one to redeem thy vow. And, oh! is there naught else I may do for

thee? Aunt Audrey is cruel and will not forgive what I could by no means avoid. But thou lovest me, Marmaduke. Wherefore may we not all live together at Combe Eversleigh and be happy as we were of old?"

"Nay, Muriel, that were no life for a brave knight, or for a Christian gentleman, even if I could bear it," he said. "Seest thou not that all things have changed?"

"I see that all hath become wretched and miserable—and that Mistress Audrey thinketh that I only am to blame. And I can not bear to see thee so careworn and grave. Let me build thy chapel here in the woods to Our Lady. So some of the old gladness may come to us again."

"I pray to God and His Blessed Mother that gladness may visit thee now and abide with thee always, my sweet cousin," Marmaduke said. "But well I know it is not His will that I should be glad—I who must be bowed down forever beneath a heritage of shame. For one only thing can I be thankful now, Muriel, and that is that thy bright young life will not be linked with mine. Yet, for I needs must love thee ever, sweet cousin, it would be rare comfort in the time to come might we do this one thing together, and raise a chapel in honor of Our Lady, wherein prayers may be offered for the soul of my father, and for ours when we, too, shall have passed away. So, if thou wilt, when my fortune is a-making and I may have

amassed some slight store of gold, I will come back to Combe Eversleigh, and thou shalt give me leave to build this chapel in the wood."

Muriel pouted somewhat, for she loved to have her will, wherein we had ever too much encouraged her, but at last gave in, and so in better cheer we returned home.

I know not wherefore we made no mention of this brave plan to Mistress Audrey, to whom we had been wont to chatter freely of our schemes. It may be we were all too sad at heart, or too full of the thought that soon Marmaduke must go. But so it was. Three days later he left us, after a sorrowful leavetaking, and we deemed that perhaps years might elapse ere we should see him again.

All this time I, at least, had heard naught of the Lord de Bletchingley, and I marveled somewhat whether Muriel heard or knew more than I. Then I learned that she did not. For on the very day of Marmaduke's departure she came to me all radiant with pleasure, as though she had shed no tears that day—and God knoweth she had wept bitterly enough—and showed me a letter tied about with crimson silk, and bade me read it aloud to her, and said that she had looked for it long. Then I, who had not forgotten another which that too much resembled, and which had wrought all our misery and woe, answered her sharply that I was her faithful servant and poor

friend now as I had ever been, but that this I could not do.

Forthwith I turned and went away. And I minded me bitterly how Marmaduke's last thought ere he left had been for her. For, remembering how she had said that Mistress Audrey was cruel and could not forgive, he spoke to his aunt, in my hearing, and besought her if she loved him to look kindly on Muriel, than whom there was none whom he loved better, or mayhap as well, in the whole world. And with many tears Mistress Audrey had promised, for his sake, to love her as of old if it might be, and I, who knew her, knew that she would keep her word. And now by Muriel his going was forgotten, in the joy of receiving a token from his false friend!

It seemed very strange to me, but at that dreary time all the world was strange, and, going up alone into mine own little chamber, out of a heart too sad for weeping I prayed that if God so willed it I might die. Presently Muriel came and knelt beside me and slid her arm about my neck and called me her own Cicely, the truest and kindest friend she had. And she told me that she loved Marmaduke as her most dear brother, and that he loved her, too, in the same way. And then she coaxed me with sweet words to listen to her talk of the Lord de Bletchingley, who longed to come to Eversleigh to see her, but dared not intrude so soon upon her grief and that of the whole house.

But he bade her be of good cheer, and to pray for him, who was all unworthy of so sweet a saint as he knew her to be, but by her example in future he would learn to amend. And to me, Cicely, he sent messages in sweet words which I valued not at all, for in my heart I ever held that man's speeches and letters to be false—as they were.

Muriel thought not so, and I had no right at that time to tell her what my own mind was on the matter, so I e'en listened to her chatter with an aching heart. And I noted that at supper her cheek was lovely with a rosy flush and her eye sparkled as of old. Verily, she was like none other I have ever known in that she was incapable of harboring any feeling or remembrance long; whereas it was hard for me and my sweet Mistress Audrey to forget. But I am lingering too long over these sad memories—belike from dread of writing others that are sadder still.

CHAPTER XII

MORE SORROW AT EVERSLEIGH

I HAVE heard some who have known great sorrow, ay, and wept sorely over the same in the first days of their grief, declare in after time that they found a kind of sad comfort in going back over the trouble, and a sweetness in the tears that they shed in later years. It hath never been so with me, and even now my spirit shrinks and my hand trembles when I strive to recount the last of the tribulations that befell at Combe Eversleigh—tribulations so terrible, albeit tempered for us who had to bear them by the merciful hand of God, that in my long life since, wherein hath been much sorrow, I have known nothing like them. The recital of so much of my story hath sorely tried the strength which the years have yet left in this old frame, and my time on earth must needs be short, therefore it behooves me not to linger, else would I gladly put off writing that which is to come. And if the tale is told in fashion so dull as to weary them who read what my hand shall write, I pray them of their charity to pardon the same, and to believe the reason thereof to be that the hand is oftentimes but a poor servant of the heart.

When Marmaduke left us for London, where he

was to await the pleasure of My Lady of Salisbury ere his future movements were decided (and he had promised to apprise us by a sure hand what these movements should be as soon as he himself should be made aware of the same), he took with him two grooms of the household, who were to remain with him henceforth, and Roger, who would ride with him to London, and after transacting some needful business in the great city, return to us with tidings of Marmaduke's well-being, and any news of town and court which he might gather during his sojourn there; albeit that was, in his intention, to be but brief.

He reached it not at all.

On the third day after their departure from Combe Eversleigh, when Mistress Audrey, Muriel, and I were seated at work in the great chamber toward evening, one of the grooms who had set out with Marmaduke came riding into the courtyard in haste, and demanded speech with Mistress Audrey, who ordered that he be sent into the hall. The man was wearied and spent with hard riding; his garments were covered with dust and splashed with mud as though he had taken the fords hastily, and, worse than all, his face was stained with tears and his voice all but choked with sobbing as he strove to tell his tale.

And this was what he told us wretched women, whose hearts had been well-nigh broken before.

The journey toward London had gone well

enough for the first day. They had rested at evening at the house of a gentleman well known to Marmaduke, who encountered them on the way and would needs take them home, whereto Marmaduke was unwilling and would have held himself excused. The man knew not why, but we knew right well. Marmaduke felt bitterly the disgrace that had fallen on his name, and wished not to face the old friends of Sir Miles.

This gentleman would by no means be refused. So for that night they rested with him. And at noon the next day they reached a country place, at whose inn they rested—that is, Marmaduke and the grooms; but my brother Roger and his man rode forward to do some needful business with a gentleman who dwelt not far from thence and who had promised to pay certain moneys that were due from him to Combe Eversleigh. He intended to return to the inn at evening, whence all were to proceed to London next day.

After Roger had ridden away a strange gentleman, whom the grooms knew not, or rather whom they saw not distinctly, for he wore his hat low over his brow and they saw him but from a distance, came to the inn and entered into conversation with Marmaduke, with whom he seemed to be well acquaint. They presently walked forth together, and the men saw them no more for the space of, it may be, an hour, and then a boy rushed in haste into the inn, calling to the host

and all others to come quickly, for that a gentleman had been wounded in a wood not far from thence, and, as he thought, was even then bleeding to death.

It was our Marmaduke.

He was senseless when they lifted him from the moss and bore him to the inn, where they bound up his wound as well as they might while waiting for a surgeon, who was long in coming, for he lived at some distance from that place. Roger met him late in the day while riding to the inn and the two came in together. The doctor shook his head and declared that the wound was a sword-cut and very deep. What might come of it he could not say. He counseled Roger to tarry there if so he might and await his master's recovery, but Marmaduke, whom the pain of probing had brought back to sense, opened his eyes and bade them carry him home to Combe Eversleigh.

Roger asked the leech if this might be done without danger, and was told that it would be better to comply with the will of the sick man, so the same was done carefully, since the wound was a deep one and recovery must needs be slow. There would be better nursing at home than in the inn, where, moreover, Roger himself might not stay by reason of distance from home and them who were in need of his care.

So Roger purveyed him of a litter and men who might bear it, and now they were bringing Mar-

maduke back to the home he had left so lately—and to us, who were almost beside ourselves with this unlooked-for grief.

Ah, me! how wearily the hours passed that night while we sat in the great chamber, listening for every sound and shaking with fear and sorrow when we heard a sudden sighing of the wind. Methinks had there been something to be done it might have been easier to bear, but beyond sending for Father Norbert and the surgeon, there was nothing we could do. The great guest-chamber was kept always in readiness, and, as it was nearest, Mistress Audrey ordained that we should lay him there. Muriel was pale and silent, scarcely looking at Mistress Audrey or me, and in truth for once we neither thought of nor looked at her.

Yet have I since thought that of us all three she must have been the most distressed. Once, when Mistress Audrey had gone into the guest-chamber to make sure that all things were in readiness, she stole her arm about my neck as she was used to do in trouble, and whispered in mine ear:

“Oh, Cicely! Who could have done this thing? What enemy had our Marmaduke?”

And I, who knew but of one, and him I suspected not, answered truly that I did not know.

Then came Mistress Audrey, and we fell to saying the chaplet of Our Lady, but not without many distractions and long pauses between the *Paters* and *Aves*, wherein we forgot that we were praying,

and listened only for sounds from without. After a weary waiting, Father Norbert came from the monastery, looking almost as anxious as we, and then came the leech, who had known and loved Marmaduke from his boyhood up. Who that had seen him ever, though but for a short period, loved him not?

Toward morning they brought him, for Roger, in his anxiety, had caused them to travel all night. They drew back the covering of the litter as they bore it into the chamber, and we saw the form that lay within. Could that be our Marmaduke? Many corpses have I seen since then, but never one more ghastly or more unlike what the living man had been than was the form that lay extended on the cushions of the litter which the men bore into our house that night. His eyes were closed and his figure was, or seemed to be, rigid and immovable, so that at first I deemed he must be dead.

But Roger, ever mindful of me no matter who might forget, and in truth at such a moment I was the last in the remembrance of all save my brother, whispered in my ear to be of good heart, for that this was not death, but only a deep sleep induced by a draught given by the leech at the moment of starting from the inn, and repeated by him once upon the way.

For it now appeared that the doctor whom they had called upon at first had come with Roger, greatly to my brother's ease and content. Now did

Master Leeson, our own leech, hold grave counsel with the stranger, and afterward with Mistress Audrey, and told her that as yet none might determine what the issue would be. For the present naught could be done beyond providing that all should be kept quiet within hearing of the sick chamber; and with her permission he himself would watch by the bedside until morning, and meantime the strange physician must seek some rest, whereof he was greatly in need.

Father Norbert, too, would needs sit up with Marmaduke, and Mistress Audrey would not hear of retiring. But us she ordered to bed.

When we had seen that Roger and the grooms had refreshed themselves, we crept away to the chamber of Muriel, and sat down upon the broad window-seat to watch for the dawn, since to go to bed was impossible either for her or for me. But ere we retired I found an opportunity to whisper a question to Roger as to whether he knew who had done this thing; for all loved and honored our Marmaduke, who, albeit brave as it behooved a good knight to show himself in lawful combat, had never been engaged in vulgar broils.

Roger shook his head gloomily and answered:

"How should I know? I was miles away when this quarrel happened—I would to God it had been otherwise—and at the inn were none who knew the wretch that dealt the blow. Of this thou mayest be certain as I am—it was never given in fair

and open fight. Now get thee to bed with Mistress Muriel or she will be moaning to-morrow for the loss of her fair looks."

This speech of Roger's angered me, for he was ever hard upon Muriel, who for this mishap, at least, was not to blame. I turned away somewhat sharply without reply and so went to her chamber as I said.

When we came down on the morrow there was a stillness as of death in the house, and the servants went about weeping quietly, and Dame Gillian, who had a sharp tongue but a kindly heart, forgot to scold, although much work was neglected, inasmuch as none had the courage to do more than wonder what should come next, until Father Norbert came forth from Marmaduke's chamber and declared that he still slept.

We went into the chapel and heard Mass with full hearts, and then to breakfast with such appetites as we might—and they were poor enough. When the leech came down and went into the sick chamber, Mistress Audrey came forth, and after a while Father Norbert, with insistence, ordained that she should seek some rest, and that Marmaduke should be tended by Dame Gillian and me.

So we went to his bedside. I could scarce believe that indeed he yet lived, he was so still and pale. The bleeding had wasted his strength, and he lay like a corpse without speech or movement, and so Master Leeson declared he must remain.

Mistress Audrey left us not long, and then I had to go to Muriel, who was weeping bitterly in the great chamber, which she would not quit lest she might thereby lose tidings of Marmaduke. I sat with and strove to comfort her, but for a long time in vain, for she sobbed upon my shoulder and vowed that she had slain Sir Miles and now her good cousin, than whom none had ever loved her better or as well. So passed that weary day, and many others, for the wound was long of healing, and we knew not whether Marmaduke would live or die. I ween we prayed fervently during those weeks. And in all that time Muriel seemed to care only for Marmaduke, and spake no word of the Lord de Bletchingley. Once when Marmaduke had taken a turn for the worse and we were almost distraught with terror and grief, she whispered to me that if only God would spare him so that this sin might not lie upon her soul she would even wed him on his recovery if he would.

I knew that this might never be, for how could our Marmaduke contract a marriage with his cousin and a maiden who of her own free will had bound herself to another? Yet was I glad to hear her words, for they showed forth a sense of wrongdoing and a readiness to set matters right if she might.

Alas! The wrong done was beyond her power to mend.

Sometimes I was allowed to sit with Marmaduke

for a few hours when Mistress Audrey and Dame Gillian were too weary to do aught but rest, but I ever found Muriel weeping when I returned to her side, and she grew so pale and wan that we feared she, too, would droop and fade away. So I left her but seldom, and daily strove to win her to seek the air on the terrace and in the garden, and to try upon her mandolin the airs that she loved.

She chose, rather, to sit in the broad window-seat in the great chamber, looking forth on the trees, whence the leaves were falling, and listening to the autumn winds as they sighed around the house.

At last came the glad tidings that that weary wound had begun to heal and that Marmaduke, albeit still weak as an infant, might move and speak if he would. Then he asked for Muriel and me. I had seen him sometimes, but not often, for Muriel was my charge, and in that time of endurance I had learned to love her more dearly than ever, perchance because it seemed that the others, Mistress Audrey, Father Norbert, and Dame Gillian, found it hard to love or be patient with her at times. She had wept and sighed to see Marmaduke all through his illness, and pouted when Mistress Audrey said nay, he could not bear it yet. But now when summoned to the sick room she turned paler than ever and declared she could not go thither—she was afraid.

Then Mistress Audrey waxed angry in earnest,

and said: "Now shame upon thee, Muriel, to behave in this wise more like a petted child than an up-grown maiden! Dry thy tears and follow me at once!"

And Muriel, who ever trembled at the sound of a sharp word—and in her short life it had been her hap to hear but few—instantly arose and clasping my hand said: "Come with me, my Cicely; I am afraid."

When we reached the bedside she looked once at Marmaduke, and sank upon her knees, crying, "Oh, Marmaduke, forgive me!" and he laid his wasted hand upon her silken curls, that hung all in disorder, and whispered, for he lacked the strength to speak aloud: "My sweet cousin, I have naught to forgive."

Then he greeted me with his old kindness, albeit in few words, and closed his eyes. And so we left him for that day.

Afterward it became our custom to visit his chamber every morning, and by degrees he grew stronger and was able to speak; and his smile, faint as it was, became more like what that of the Marmaduke we knew had been. When a week had passed he begged Muriel to bring her mandolin, and in a low voice we sang the hymns that he loved, and that evening, while Mistress Audrey was with us, Muriel declared that she was happy now, for that Marmaduke was recovering and soon would be among us again.

But Mistress Audrey, although she said naught to check the bright hope of the maiden, who ever loved to look on the fair side of life, turned her head aside to hide her tears. Master Leeson spoke hopefully when he made his visits, especially before us who were younger, but I noted that Father Norbert always looked grave.

In spite of all, a day came when Marmaduke desired to be brought out into the hall, and we made ready a settle with cushions, whereon they laid him, and strove to make rejoicing as though great things had been done. Ah me, it was a poor pretense! Muriel sang and played and smiled her brightest, and her pretty sayings brought a light to his eyes and an answering smile to his pale lip.

But when we were alone in her chamber she threw herself on her knees at my side and sobbed amid her tears:

“Oh, Cicely, he is dying! He will never be our Marmaduke again!”

CHAPTER XIII

THE PROMISE RENEWED

AND now when she had realized even sooner than I that the sad end must come, there came a change to our Muriel. She spoke no more of what she feared for Marmaduke, but gave herself to brightening his life while it should last. I had not guessed, nor had any other, that so much devotion dwelt in the soul that, albeit ever winsome and lovable, had seemed to us all a child's soul till now.

In her chamber she wept, when there were none but me to see her tears, but with Marmaduke she was ever bright and almost gay.

And he could not bear to have her away.

For that matter he craved for my poor company, too; and so we spent the days at his side, sometimes speaking, sometimes silent; in the depths of our hearts always sad.

For although the wound had healed, Marmaduke grew weaker daily, and none of us doubted that he must die. He seemed to have forgotten the false Lord de Bletchingley, and to look upon and think of us all as in the old glad days before he and sorrow had come to Combe Eversleigh; and of the quarrel in which he was wounded or of the man who dealt the blow he said not a word.

Once I ventured to ask Mistress Audrey whether any disclosure had been made, and whether the false caitiff who had cut short that noble life was to remain unpunished and unknown, and she answered :

“Alas, good Cicely, to what end should we seek vengeance now? And for the life thou lamentest—thinkest thou that our Marmaduke could ever know happiness again? God knoweth that sorrow like this hath never come to me before, yet doth my reason assure me that in this, as in all things, Providence hath ordered wisely and well. I care not to know the hand that wrought the deed, but I pray that, so it be God’s will, I may not linger behind him longer than needs must. I would see thee and Muriel well placed, my Cicely, and then——”

But I bowed my head upon her lap and wept, and for that time Mistress Audrey said no more.

While we sat that afternoon in silence by the couch of Marmaduke, afraid to move, for he seemed to sleep, he opened his eyes and smiled upon Muriel, who sat on a low stool by his side, and stretching forth his thin hand, laid it, as of late he had been wont to do, on her head. She glanced up at him brightly, albeit her eyes were dim with tears, and he said : “I have a fancy, my cousin, to see thee once more in the gay robe I brought thee from London. Truly thou shouldst never wear anything less costly and fair. Hast thou forgotten

the garment of velvet of which thou wert in dread?"

"Wouldst thou in good truth that I should put on thy beautiful gift, my cousin?" she said. "Alas, how can I don gay robes and trinkets when thou art so ill? Wait until thou canst dance a measure with me, Marmaduke, and then shalt thou see how brave I can be."

"For me that time will not come, sweet Muriel; I shall never dance a measure again. And I pray thee to believe, my cousin, that I know it to be better so. May God send thee all the happiness I wish thee on earth and in heaven—and make thy life as long as I trust it will be glad. But I shall not see it with the eyes of my body. Peradventure I may be permitted to watch over those whom I have loved from another world."

"I hope and pray that thou mayest be spared to us here, Marmaduke," she said softly; "and should God listen to our prayers, oh, believe, my cousin, that we will do all that we may to make life happy as it was long ago."

"Then, if it be so, give me a pleasure now, Muriel," he answered; "let me see thee in thy gay court raiment once more. Then shalt thou sit by my side and sing to thy mandolin with Cicely, and we will dream that the old times have returned."

Muriel looked with questioning eyes to Mistress Audrey, who strove to smile as she said:

"We must e'en indulge him for once, Muriel; let us see thee arrayed in thy fine dress."

So we went forth from the chamber, Muriel and I, and I tried to assist her, but my fingers trembled and more than once we stopped to weep.

The wondrous dress was fastened at last, and her bright curls gathered back under the spray of gems that had held them on that terrible night, and we went into the great hall again. My heart was full well-nigh to bursting as I followed Muriel through the door, but even then I could not but note what a vision of beauty she was as she passed up the great chamber and knelt by his side.

"Thou art very good to me, my cousin," he said; "wilt thou favor me still further, Muriel? There is another boon I would crave."

"Oh, Marmaduke, what is there I could deny thee?" she sobbed. "Ask anything thou wilt. It shall be done if I have power or strength to do it."

"Then promise that thou wilt wear my gift at thy wedding, my cousin. I——"

"Oh, hush, I beseech thee, Marmaduke," she cried; "God knoweth I shall never wed."

"Thou deemest so now because thy heart is sore, my Muriel; but happy days are in store for thee yet. When thou seest their dawn, remember the boon I have asked of thee, and grant it if thou canst. I shall rejoice over thy happiness, I know. And, Muriel, if thou canst, thou wilt remember that other promise—*anent* Our Lady's chapel in the

wood. It may be"—and here it seemed to me that his brow clouded—"it may be that obstacles unlooked for now may stand in the way of its fulfilment, and then——"

"I call God to witness that if I live no obstacle shall stand in the way of the fulfilment of that vow," she cried, raising her head, "and that I will never dwell in any other place than this, nor wed with mortal man, nor know pleasure or comfort upon earth until that work is done as thou wouldst have it, Marmaduke. Art thou content?"

"I am content," he answered, and closed his eyes and seemed to sleep.

Then I noted for the first time that Mistress Audrey was not there. She had left the hall when Muriel entered in her gay robe. But presently she returned, and after that we sat silent till the sun went down, and darkness began to close over the earth. Marmaduke seemed to sleep during all those hours, but when the great bell suddenly rang out for the *Ave* he opened his eyes, and looked round upon us all with a wondering gaze, and his face was strangely changed.

Mistress Audrey saw it as I did, and whispered to me to send for Father Norbert, who was reading his breviary on the terrace without. I ran for him speedily, and as soon as I saw his first look at Marmaduke I knew what was to come. Silently we passed out of the chamber, and even then Muriel glanced wonderingly from Mistress Audrey

to me as though she thought it hard to have to go, and understood not what we saw but too well. Her eighteen years had left her but a child.

Marmaduke had received the Holy Unction in the first days of his wound and Father Norbert had taken to him the Blessed Viaticum that morning; there was naught for us to do but pray. Them of the household were sent for, and they wept bitterly as they knelt around the bed, for one and all had loved Marmaduke. Father Norbert read the prayers for the departing soul and we made the responses as best we might, but much I fear me that my mind was distracted, not with wandering thoughts, for I knew not during that time that there was a world outside the chamber wherein we knelt; but with a stupid, unmeaning wonder if that could be truly our Marmaduke who lay there so gray and still; if those prayers could be for him.

Once he opened his eyes with a wild, startled look, and fixing them on Father Norbert, cried aloud, so that we all heard him: "Father, I forgive him!" and I knew that he was troubled by a thought of his false friend.

Father Norbert bent over the bed and said somewhat that only Marmaduke might hear, and he closed his eyes, while we fell to praying again. Muriel was kneeling close to the pillow, her bright robe making a strange picture in that solemn hour.

Neither she nor Marmaduke thought of it now. His breathing became labored, and half I deemed that I could not bear it, we were all so still, when suddenly he opened his eyes again, and stretching out his hand as he had done once before, he laid it on Muriel's head. She looked up, and he turned his face toward her and, gazing straight into her eyes, he said:

"Muriel! My father! Remember!"

I knew not what he meant, and wished passionately that he would speak more plainly, but there was no need, for Muriel understood. She was ever petulant—alas, our love had made her so, and grief had driven her almost wild, for she loved Marmaduke.

Clasping her hands and looking into the eyes of the dying man, she answered passionately:

"Marmaduke, dost thou doubt me even now? I swear to keep my word to thee, though I never enter heaven till it is done, and if I have to carry all the stones with these hands."

I saw his lips move and heard him murmur, "God bless thee, my cousin."

Then a grayer pallor settled down upon his face, and his hand slipped from Muriel's head to her shoulder. Father Norbert gently replaced it on the couch and began the prayers for a departed soul.

We knew then that the old house was desolate. Marmaduke Eversleigh was dead.

When the prayers were ended Mistress Audrey bade me lead Muriel to her chamber and stay with her until she should become quiet, for she was weeping with wild sobs that would not be restrained. In good truth, she thought not of restraining them; and when we were alone she would not be comforted, but clung to me, crying: "Oh, Cicely, I loved him so! And even in death he misdoubted me."

At last she sobbed herself to sleep, and I crept down to Mistress Audrey, whom I found neither sobbing nor weeping—she might not find the blessed help of tears. She was kneeling beside the couch in the great chamber where lay all that was left to us of Marmaduke. I set myself beside her, and strove to pray, but I could not. My selfish thoughts were with the dead. There was a grave, still majesty upon the noble brow which I had not noted in life, though mayhap it had been there. It awed me strangely now, and I was frightened at feeling awed by our Marmaduke. We had never been so desolate before, for our trust had been in him—and he was gone.

I saw not then how a merciful God takes away the props that we lean upon when such leaning prevents trust in Him. I hope that the thought came to me later, but then the grief was too new.

After a while Mistress Audrey bade me look after Muriel, but she still slept, sobbing often in her sleep. She was worn out by the great sorrows

which had fallen so suddenly into the bright life that had known no sorrow before. So we passed the night, now in the death-chamber, striving to pray for him to whom I longed to call for help in my desolate grief; now creeping upstairs to steal a glance at Muriel, and thanking God through whose merciful compassion she still slept.

For a few days we kept him with us, and there was some comfort in kneeling by his side and striving to pray. Then the neighbors gathered in such numbers as had not been seen for long years at Combe Eversleigh, and the last Sir Marmaduke Eversleigh was borne to his grave. They who had held aloof from and disliked the father had loved and honored the son. Muriel was too sick to leave her bed on that day, and so I might not follow him to the tomb.

Perhaps it was a little thing and mattered not—or would not have mattered to one wiser than I. But while I would not for anything have left Muriel while she clung to me in her sorrow, which mayhap was greater than mine, yet did I weep like a petted child to think that so many who loved him not as I did could be at the Requiem and kneel by his coffin, while I, who loved none other like him, was debarred from that poor solace to my grief.

CHAPTER XIV

NOT KEPT

MURIEL was long ill after that. The trouble had mounted to her brain, the doctor told us, and day and night we watched beside her, Mistress Audrey and I. Sometimes she knew us, but more often she deemed that we were strangers who had carried her forcibly away, and begged piteously to be taken back to Combe Eversleigh, calling on Marmaduke to save her and wondering wherefore he left her unaided so long.

Methinks to see her suffer in any way had been hard enough to bear, but to hear her raving for him who was cold in his grave in the chancel well-nigh broke our hearts. Mistress Audrey waxed paler and thinner day by day; her beautiful hair had turned white when her brother died.

Dame Gillian did what she could in that time of trouble, and my Roger was a tower of strength; but he ever showed less compassion for our Muriel than I longed to see, and once he angered me by saying that if such were God's will, he deemed it would be well if she should die. I answered him that if it should be so I prayed God and His Blessed Mother in their mercy to take me too, whereat he responded that such words were ungrateful and savored little of love for Mistress

Audrey, who, in his mind, was more worthy to be thought of and cared for than all the Muriels in the world.

He was right, it may be, and in good truth I loved her, but Muriel had wound herself about my very heart-strings, for she had always depended upon me. Nevertheless, I laid Roger's words to heart, and strove to look better after my godmother and to save her toil when I could. Oftentimes I persuaded her to leave me through the night with Muriel, under pretext that she was more content with me than with any—and this in some sort was true.

Before Christmas Muriel began to recover, but our trouble was not over, for then I fell sick, and Mistress Audrey had us both on her hands. I lay long between life and death, they told me afterwards. For myself I knew not how time passed, but by God's help and Mistress Audrey's good nursing I grew better at last. Ah, me, how good they were! Mistress Audrey sat with and prayed by me; Muriel spent long hours by my bed and often told me that when I was at the worst she had prayed as never before, for that she could not live without Cicely; and my godmother wept when the leech said I should not die as I had not seen her do even when we lost Marmaduke. I wot well that then her grief was all too deep for tears. She told me that God had been good to her in leaving one comfort in me, and methought I could have

borne a longer sickness and more painful for the happiness that came to me with those words.

As I grew stronger and memory came back to me, I thought much over all that had gone, and wondered whether Muriel had done aught toward carrying out the promise made so solemnly to Marmaduke on his death-bed—the promise which had been made binding by an oath. I thought, too, of the Lord de Bletchingley, and longed to know if aught had been heard of him since the troubles that had fallen upon the house. I dared not question Mistress Audrey, and would not ask Muriel, who was fast becoming what she had been in the glad days that were gone. But one day when Roger had been brought in by Mistress Audrey to sit with me I asked him what news he had heard of the world beyond Combe Eversleigh, hoping that in answer he would tell me what I wished to know.

His brow darkened at my words.

“Nought that is good,” he made answer; “I ween the world hath ever been bad enough, and its master the devil hath had good service at its hands; but never since the days of creation hath it been as truly given over to him as now.”

Then he told me how the Lord Bishop of Rochester had been done to death because he would not act against his conscience to satisfy the King, and how the good Lord Chancellor, Sir Thomas More, had lost his head for the same cause.

And while I, who was still weak, wept to hear of such doings, Dame Gillian came in and rated Roger soundly for saying what would set me back, so she said, and work more harm than the leech with all his skill could make right. So Roger departed in great trouble and perplexity, vowing that he had thought of nothing but to please me, and that he understood not women and their ways.

After that he would tell me nothing, save only what weather was without, how soon we might look for catkins by the brook, and what would be doing at Easter, all which I cared not to know.

At last I was dressed and carried into the great chamber, our old sitting-room, where Marmaduke had died. Roger set me in a wide chair well filled with cushions, and went away; I ween he would not stay, fearing that memory might be too much for me. And for a while it had like so to be. But Muriel came to sit beside me, and Mistress Audrey brought a cordial, and the servants made excuse for coming in, until the present kindness drove away, or rather softened, the thought of bygone grief, and I felt strangely consoled.

Muriel showed me that day when we were alone a letter that had come some time before from the Lord de Bletchingley, wherein he bade her to think of him ever, as he never ceased to think of her, and to lay it to his misfortune rather than neglect that he came not to see her as was both his duty and, more than aught that he could wish for in this

world, his desire. But by reason of his business at the court, whereat he was detained by his duty to His Majesty the King, who had need that all his faithful servants should abide with him at this time, when so many did show themselves to be disobedient and rebellious, he was compelled to remain away from her who was the idol of his soul.

Much more was there to the same effect, the which I liked not at all. For in the first place such language was overstrained, and could scarce be true, since in all the time of her sore sickness he had not so much as sent a groom with inquiries, and in the next those whom he wrote of as showing themselves "so disobedient and rebellious" to the King's Grace were none other than they who approved not his marriage with Mistress Anne and his subsequent doings, and were like to prove his best friends in the end.

But Muriel could see nought of this. To her mind the Lord de Bletchingley was a true and loyal knight, faithful in service to his lady and his King, while I feared too sadly that he would prove traitor to both, since he had wofully betrayed his friend.

As I grew stronger I learned from Mistress Audrey that our Marmaduke had made a will before he died, not for the disposition of his property, for in truth he had nought whereof to dispose, but to arrange for the well-being of Muriel, who was still under age, and whose guardian, since the death of

his father, he had been. And in that testament he prayed Father Norbert, Mistress Audrey, and my Roger to have care of her, and begged her to be mindful of their counsel in all things, as better or wiser friends she could not find. Moreover, he begged her to delay her marriage until such time as she should have reached the age of twenty-one for reasons wherewith he had acquainted Father Norbert and whereof that holy man had approved. Mistress Audrey told me that our Muriel wept bitterly when she heard the terms of this will, and vowed that she should never wed. But that was when the grief for Marmaduke's death was fresh in heart and memory, and my godmother set small faith on her words. And yet she said she would be truly rejoiced in spirit and most thankful to God so He would drive from the child's mind forever all thought of the false lord on whom her heart had once been set.

Roger's brow grew black as midnight when I strove to make him speak of the Lord de Bletchingley.

"The lands of Mistress Muriel have been left in charge with me," he said; "and I thank the Lord that she may not wed until she is of the age of twenty-one. That is, unless she hath a mind to transgress the will of the dead. Then, if she still holds to this lord, will I render my accounts into her hands and seek other service, for at Combe Eversleigh with him I will not abide. And do

thou, Cicely, pray to God that I may never come face to face with Ralph de Bletchingley; for verily if we met I must force him to try the point of my good sword despite the difference of our degree."

At this speech I marveled greatly, for although he had loved Marmaduke dearly and owed him much, Roger had ever been a good Christian and one who sought not to avenge injuries that were done to him, or to seek a quarrel with them who did him wrong. But I spoke to him on that matter no more, but rather prayed God to bring peace.

I was troubled in mind anent that promise of Muriel's wherewith she had quieted the last moments of Marmaduke, and of which she seemed to me now to think not at all. None knew of it save herself and me, and she never spoke of it, nor did I hear aught of building a chapel nor of preparations made to that effect in the wood. I asked Roger if they had minded to bring the statue of Our Lady into the house while Muriel was sick, for I had clean forgotten to see to it amid so many cares, and he made answer that he had given orders that it should be cared for, and had taken heed that they should be obeyed. Then I willed to know, as if for my own devotion, if we might not build some shelter for the image so that it might remain during the rough weather in the woods where Marmaduke had placed it first, whereat Roger stared as though I had been distraught.

"Marry, Cicely," he said, "thinkest thou that because the charge of Mistress Muriel's goods hath been confided to me, I have leave to spend them as I will? None but she can do what thou sayest, and she hath spoken of nothing of the kind to me."

Wherewith I was fain to be content, but determined to speak of the matter with Muriel, who had cast off her sorrow and seemed well-nigh as blithe as of old. So one day as we sat together, when we had finished the chaplet, I said to her half-fearfully, though wherefore I should have trembled I did not know:

"Muriel, I pray thee tell me whether thou hast yet commenced the work of that chapel wherewith Marmaduke charged thee on his death-bed, and which thou didst promise him so solemnly thou wouldst have made?"

She flushed crimson, and then grew pale, and her beautiful eyes filled with tears.

"How could I see to or think of aught save thee, Cicely," she said, "whilst thou wert so sick and nigh to death? Wrong me not by supposing that I have forgotten aught that Marmaduke loved or willed. I promise thee his chapel shall be builded yet."

"But, dearest, the words of thy promise were framed in solemn wise," I ventured to say, "and thy vow was made to the dying in behalf of the dead. Were it not well to set about the work speedily for the sake of their souls and thine own?"

"Content thee, Cicely," answered Muriel; "thou art not more anxious as to this matter than am I. I will speak to Father Norbert and thy Roger when the weather is fairer, for none would set to work now in the woods."

There was truth in this, for the spring rains were falling and were more heavy than usual that year. They ceased toward the end of April and all the earth became lovely with verdure and flowers. I could walk through the house and go to the chapel by that time, and Mistress Audrey ordained that the village maids should go a-May-ing in the woods, and come with garlands and green branches to dance on the terrace as they had been wont to do in other years to please Muriel and me.

How long ago it seemed! and how I dreaded their mirth! But the thought put new life into Muriel.

"For the love of Our Lady, sweet Cicely, let us be merry for once," she said; "and say an *Ave*, I pray thee, that on that May-day we may have fair weather and sunshine, and—hearken while I whisper, Cicely—that I may hear something from Ralph."

That very day as I walked alone on the terrace Roger came to me, and asked if I had heard aught that I might repeat concerning the Lord de Bletchingley, and whether he had written to any at Combe Eversley of late. When I answered that

I had heard and knew nought of him, he shook his head and turned away, but I feared that his knowledge was greater than mine. Howbeit I asked nothing, for he loved not to be questioned, and although he was by two years my junior, Roger ever seemed older than I.

May-day came, and we rose early and went out into the meadows to gather dew for the washing of our faces to keep freckles away, and our blithe Muriel was happy as a child. When the lads and lasses came to dance on the terrace she begged leave to try one measure in honor of the May, and Mistress Audrey gladly gave leave.

So she danced amongst the garlands they held over her—the fairest blossom of them all—and I well-nigh envied her lightness of heart. Once more her merry laugh rang out and a cloud of sadness seemed lifted from the house. When she came in to me after that dance she nestled to my side and whispered:

“Ah, Cicely, let us be happy! Wherefore should young hearts be sad? We have grieved long for them that have gone—in truth we must grieve for them always; but surely we may strive to forget sorrow sometimes? I am a-wearied with these somber garments and the sad faces we have worn for so long. Now am I going to play the May-song the maidens sang for us to-day. My poor mandolin will scarce know the touch of my fingers.

Tune it for me, good Cicely, and then sing with me again."

My heart was heavy enough and I was little disposed for singing, but who could refuse our Muriel when she lifted her sweet face so wistfully and murmured such caressing words as she whispered to me while I tuned her lute? Not I. And after all it may be that she was more reasonable than I, for the holy Apostle bids us not to mourn for them that have gone as they do who are without hope. But I mourned for us who were left, not for Marmaduke.

I did her bidding, as I had ever been wont to do, and at the sound of our voices Father Norbert came in and cried, "Well done, my children. It is right to welcome the May." And the same thing he said to Mistress Audrey, and counseled her to bring young folks to Combe Eversleigh and to send Muriel sometimes abroad; for now that she was the owner of the place and would soon be its mistress, it was well that she should become known to the neighbors and win their good-will.

It was too soon to bring gay company into what had so lately been a house of mourning, but from that day friends came now and then, and we, that is, Mistress Audrey, Muriel and I, went sometimes abroad. Soon Muriel's cheek regained its lost roundness and bloom, her step grew light, and her voice glad as of old. And she loved less and less to hear mention of them that had departed, and

would not let me even speak of her promise to Marmaduke; nor did she once through that summer visit the shrine of Our Lady in the wood.

But I could not forget the words of the promise thrice repeated, which were the last that Marmaduke had heard in this world. A great fear took possession of my soul lest the dead might return to claim the fulfilment of that vow, and I crept about the house in awe and trembling, half expecting to meet in every dark corner the unquiet spirit of Sir Miles.

But he never came, at the least not to me, nor to any other that I heard of, and as none of the household were in dread of any such thing, I dared not mention my fear. As for Mistress Audrey she hated nothing more than what she had ever called foolish superstition, and many a time had I known her to chide Dame Gillian for the recounting to us of ghost stories when we were young. Foolish I was and wanting in reason thus to take upon my mind and conscience a matter wherein I had no part, but methinks my folly arose in great measure from the love I bore to Marmaduke and Muriel. The little I could do I did, and all my spare time was spent in the chapel or before the image of Our Lady in the wood praying for Marmaduke, and many small sums of money I obtained from my brother Roger, which I expended in alms to have Masses said for the soul of Sir Miles.

CHAPTER XV

A RUMOR

It may well be believed that during the time of our sore trouble and the sickness that followed thereupon, we at Combe Eversleigh heard little and cared less about what went on in the great world. But now that by Father Norbert's counsel some were invited to visit Muriel, and she returned such courtesy as in duty bound, many rumors reached us, and few of a kind to make good Christians rejoice.

Whether it were owing to the influence of Mistress Anne Boleyn (whom I never yet could call Queen) as some would have, or to his own advancing infirmities of temper and age, I can not tell, but from some cause—I wot it may have been by counsel of the Evil One, to whom he seemed to have delivered himself in his latter years, the King became changed from a kindly sovereign, albeit a man of loose and careless life, into a terrible tyrant, against whose wrath no man could stand. He had set himself up like Lucifer or that heathen monarch of Babylon in whose service the holy prophet Daniel lived, and would fain have been worshiped as God. That is, he usurped unto himself the place which could be filled by none other than the representative of God upon earth, and

must needs be acknowledged Head of the Church.

Nor were there wanting about him them who encouraged his folly, and thereby brought such as were of a right mind to shame. And even to Combe Eversleigh came more than simple report of what was done afar off; for the monasteries, whereof more than one were in our neighborhood, and the great abbey served by the Benedictines, were visited by the King's messengers, and although nothing more was done at that time it was well understood on all hands that the lands and goods of those convents and holy places would be seized and given over to His Majesty unless the abbots and superiors would consent to his will; and this in conscience they could in nowise do. Moreover it was said, and this by them who knew the truth, that divers nobles and even some of lesser degree had been carried before the King's Council and examined as to their belief in the right of His Holiness to be considered and obeyed as Head of the Church of God in these realms, and had met with hard usage if they stood firm, and some were like to lose their heads.

Father Norbert, who dwelt at the Priory on the other side of the hill, and came to us often, as I have shown, shook his head and declared that worse times had not been known in our country than were coming to us now; and told us that more than my Lord of Rochester and the brave Chan-

cellor Thomas More might hope for martyrdom before long.

So considering all these things, and bearing in mind, of her goodness, that my health seemed ever to grow rather worse than better, and hoping, too, something for Muriel when she should be altogether beyond the reach of the Lord de Bletchingley, whom she had by no means forgot, Mistress Audrey took counsel with Father Norbert and Roger as to whether it might not be wise and well for us to pass over seas and spend some time where God could be served in the old fashion with a clear conscience and we might peradventure forget the Lord de Bletchingley and the evil he had wrought. Muriel was half wild with delight when she heard of the plan, and almost bitterly I thought, when she came dancing to me with dreams of all she would do and see abroad, that they need not fear but she would forget the man she hoped to marry speedily enough. Ah, me, I little knew!

Father Norbert deemed the scheme a good one, and Roger liked it well. So forthwith we set about preparing for a change. There was much to be done, for the servants were many, and some of them old. All were as part of the family and must be provided for ere we went away. Dame Gillian would remain at Combe Eversleigh with one or two maids and Master Wallis, the house-steward, and two grooms. For the others, save

Muriel's woman Kate, and Mistress Audrey's maid Joan, some fitting place of sojourn must be found. While Mistress Audrey was busied about this and many other matters, Muriel gained leave to visit the friends and acquaintances whom she had made, or whom Father Norbert had found for her, and nothing would do for her but I must needs go too.

It chanced that in the month of August, when our preparations were well-nigh completed, and it had been decided that until the year of mourning was over we should live in a house in Brittany belonging to Alison Walters, of whom I have written as the betrothed of my brother, we, Muriel and I, were spending some days at the home of our good neighbor Squire Harley, who had known and loved Marmaduke, and had even visited Sir Miles during his lifetime sometimes, but at long intervals and on rare occasions, it is true. He had three fair daughters; and his wife, a most excellent lady, pious and full of compassion and love for the poor, had taken a great affection for our Muriel and always loved to see her in her house. For me too, although so unworthy, she was good enough to profess regard, and many acts of kindness had I to thank her for, besides wise counsel and advice.

I spent much time in the room wherein she was wont to compound medicaments for all that applied to her, or were in need, and sometimes accompanied her in her visits to the cottagers who lived upon her husband's lands. So it happened

that I was often weary at the close of the day and glad to rest in quiet behind the wide curtains of the windows when the rest of the young folks amused themselves with story-telling in the twilight, or with music and singing, or sometimes even with a dance.

Thus it happened that I was hidden one evening and no one knew that I was there, for I had come in before the rest, when Constance Harley and her cousin Bess sat down outside my curtain while the others were dancing, and began carelessly to talk. And soon I heard names that made me start and fear I knew not what, for they spoke of the Lord de Bletchingley and Muriel.

"Canst thou tell me aught, good Constance, of the betrothal of the Lord de Bletchingley with fair Mistress Muriel?" asked Bess; "or knowest thou if there be truth in the report? I heard it from Mary Haughton but yesterday, and methinks it can be scarce more than an idle tale."

"I know not wherefore thou shouldst not believe it, my Bess," answered Constance, who loved Muriel and had some reason for knowing the truth. "Certes, we have not doubted the story; and if thou comest hither when her mourning is over and Muriel returns from abroad, thou wilt see a blithe bridal, I trust."

"But it was believed by all that Mistress Muriel was betrothed to Sir Marmaduke, whom may God assoilzie," said Bess, crossing herself out of rever-

ence to the dead, our dead for whom I could scarcely yet force myself to pray, despite the long hours I spent in the chapel at home.

"There was some thought of that long since, when Muriel was a child," said Constance; "but that marriage was afterwards broken off, for what reason I know not; but I think not that Muriel regretted the change. Since then she hath been affianced to the Lord de Bletchingley. She was betrothed to him before the death of Sir Miles."

"I would fain believe this for the sake of fair Muriel," remarked Bess presently, after she had sat silent for a time; "but if it be so, Constance, I fear me much that somewhere there must be foul wrong. Unless, indeed, rumor hath played another of her wonted tricks and belied a noble gentleman, as is not unlike to be true. But I tell thee that my cousin Tom Neville hath come lately from court, and I heard him speak last week of the approaching marriage of this same de Bletchingley, and I promise thee that Muriel Eversleigh was not the name of the bride."

At this I could forbear no longer from coming forth, and besides deemed it no honorable thing to listen in ambush to that which, it may be, Bess Lynecourt might not have spoken before me. So I drew aside my curtain and said, "I pray you, Mistress Bessie, if it be not too troublesome, tell me what you may have heard, and on whose authority the report was spread. It is no secret that

Mistress Muriel Eversleigh is betrothed to the Lord de Bletchingley, although no ceremony hath taken place in public as yet. That was owing to the death of her uncle and guardian, Sir Miles. That he hath broken faith with Mistress Muriel is hard to believe, and I must needs think that the report of which you spoke but now is untrue."

"For the sake of fair Mistress Muriel I would fain hope so," Bess answered; "and that many rumors are spread which have little foundation must needs be confessed. Let us say no more of this matter, Mistress Cicely, so please you. If you will, I will learn the truth, or as much thereof as he can tell me, from my Cousin Tom, and Constance here may let you know it when she next goes to Eversleigh; wilt thou not, Con?"

Constance declared she would very readily, but this was scarce enough for me; and I begged Mistress Bess to tell me there and then what she had heard. So with much pain at grieving me she told me briefly the tale she had heard; and the story amounted to this.

There were rumors in London that the Lord de Bletchingley was shortly to wed a rich and noble lady of great beauty, and accomplished in all things as a lady should be. Bess had heard her name from her cousin, but it had not bided in her memory; she would make him write it for her when she should see him again. And this was all I could learn. I entreated these maidens to let

no word of all this reach Muriel, who was in happy ignorance now, and they promised to speak of it to none.

We were to return to Combe Eversleigh on the morrow, but I would have trusted them had we intended to stay, for Constance was a discreet and prudent damsel who had been well trained by the good lady her mother, and Bess was distressed to see that I was troubled by her talk. She strove to comfort me by saying that the young men who visited London were over apt to swagger in speech and tell tales of them of higher degree than themselves in order to make it appear that they were in the confidence and the intimate companions of earls and barons at the least. She tried to laugh and speak lightly, but I could see that she was ill at ease to think of the mischief she had innocently done.

Roger came to fetch us next morning and I determined to tell him what I had heard when we should reach Combe Eversleigh, whence Squire Harley's place was not distant more than ten miles. We were welcomed right gladly by Mistress Audrey, whom I, for mine own part, grieved to leave so much alone. Her step was feeble and her voice was low, and sounded ever as though it came from afar. It seemed to me sometimes as if her heart had been buried with Sir Miles and Marmaduke, yet was she ever gentle in manner and careful and most thoughtful for all.

In the afternoon I sought Roger and told him what I had heard at Harley Manor, and asked him if he thought that report could be true. I never loved to hear him speak of the Lord de Bletchingley, but whether from weakness of body, or because my soul was weary with grief, I could not keep this trouble to myself. But now I was angry with him and myself when I had spoken, for he turned his head from me and laughed.

"Methinks thou art somewhat unmannerly, Roger," I said more sharply than I was wont to speak. "Thinkest thou that the faith of a nobleman and the happiness of a gentle lady be matter for laughter, I pray?"

"I think that the same gentle lady wrecked her own happiness and that of them who are worth far more than she when she cast aside the love of the truest heart that ever beat, good Cis," he made answer. "And as for the faith of this Lord de Bletchingley, methinks that thou, if any, should know what it is worth. I did but laugh at thine innocence and—pardon me, my sister—that of thy fair friend, which could suppose that he would keep troth with a country maiden if he could find one to listen to him who may suit his purposes better, or is more richly dowered than she."

"Then thou believest he hath played her false?" I cried in terror; "if it be so, Muriel will die."

"I scarce think so," said Roger, and this time he laughed not, for he was a good brother and

never gave me pain save when he spoke slightly of Muriel; "but, Cicely, meseems that even were it so, there be worse things than death, and some that be harder to bear. Mayhap we shall hear no more of this gallant, and once Mistress Muriel is away let us hope she may forget him, as she found it easy enough to do for a better man."

And then we fell to talking of his own marriage with Alison, which was to come off quietly in the church at Combe Eversleigh before we left the old home. Roger told me, moreover, that one had come forward on hearing that Mistress Muriel was about to leave England, and offered to take the house until such time as we should return; and moreover he would retain them of the household in his service so only they were willing to remain. At this I rejoiced greatly, for I knew how much Mistress Audrey's burden would be lightened, since the future of her good servants had weighed heavily on her mind.

Then I went to see Alison, who greeted me gladly, albeit she was always somewhat shy, and she told me of all her plans for the coming year with many blushes, and much sorrow that I was forced to leave her just when she would have a right to claim as much of my love as I could spare from Mistress Muriel and Roger and Mistress Audrey, of whom she was somewhat afraid. So was not I; and none could guess how I longed to lay my head upon her bosom and pour out all my

troubles to the only mother I had ever known. It might not be. They would have been troubles tenfold to her, and there was nought that she could have done to ward them off from Muriel save pray. That she did always as I knew well.

But one thing I might do, and must. I could make another appeal to Muriel in behalf of the promise made to Marmaduke; the promise that she would dwell in no other place than Combe Eversleigh nor know no comfort on earth until that work was done on which he had so strangely set his heart. So I drew Muriel out to the garden that evening, and when we were seated under the shadow of an ancient yew at whose foot stood the bench whereon in childhood we had been used to rest after long gambols on the green turf, I asked her as gently as I might if she had recalled that promise to mind, and whether she had as yet taken counsel with Mistress Audrey or Father Norbert as to the building of the chapel whereto she had pledged herself to the dead.

The hot color flooded her fair face and she made answer that she had in nowise forgotten that promise to Marmaduke, and had nothing more at heart than its fulfilment at some future and more convenient time. But her good guardians were already overburdened with thought for her, and she could lay no more on them now. Then I reminded her of the words of the vow, which none had demanded; they had been added of her own

free will; and asked her how she could deem that my dear godmother or Father Norbert, or for that matter my brother Roger, either, could regard as a burden aught that Marmaduke had so earnestly desired to have done. Already were the workmen busy in the chapel building a fair archway ornamented with sculptor's work, and beneath it were to rest the images of Sir Miles and Marmaduke, made as like unto the life as might be in white stone; and Masses would be said forever at Eversleigh for the repose of their souls. All this had been done, or was doing, by them whom she doubted. Was it likely that they would look on it as hardship when she asked them to help her to fulfil a solemn vow?

"Ask me not now, Cicely!" she cried, while the ready tears streamed down her cheek. "Little thou knowest how much I am terrified by those same stern images of the dead. Let me forget for a while, I beseech thee. I promise thee that I will have the chapel builded as my cousin willed on our return."

Then did I call to her mind how solemnly she had vowed to do this thing ere she left Combe Eversleigh even though she had to carry the stones with her own hands; and forthwith she broke into passionate sobbing, vowing that in the wide world was no lady so unhappy as she. She had been well-nigh worn to death with sadness and sorrow, and now just when her heart was beginning to

feel comfort and the weight of grief promised to lift with change of scene, I would have her bring all back, and must needs recall that awful death-bed and make her miserable again.

Now to me the death-bed of Sir Miles had truly been an awful one, and something that I loved not to recall. But of Marmaduke I had no such thought, and ever dwelt upon his end with comfort—the only comfort I could feel in his loss. So now I could but weep and turn away. Then Muriel fell to coaxing, as was ever her way, and she called me her best Cicely and made fresh promises anent the chapel, and of all that she would do when we should return from our travels; only force her not to think of death now.

What could I do? My heart was heavy with foreboding of evil, but there was no making Muriel other than she was. So I kissed her, and prayed God to keep her from harm, and she, believing all to be gained, whispered a question whether I deemed not it was time she heard something from Ralph, for so would she ever call the man whom I looked upon, it may be unjustly, as the destroyer of the happiness of us all. Then came back to mind the gossip I had heard at Harley Manor and I wondered, shuddering, if Bess's tale could be true. But I turned away her question as best I might and we went in to Mistress Audrey, who saw that Muriel had been weeping, and chided me for staying out so long.

Since the troubles that had come upon us Muriel had feared to sleep alone, and when I recovered from that sickness whereof I had been ill so long, I shared her chamber in place of her woman who had stayed with her at night till then. All that night she tossed and moaned in broken slumber and often did I hear her murmur the name of that false lord.

Then I resolved that ere we left Combe Eversleigh we must learn the truth, for I saw that our Muriel thought of him more than we had deemed. I strove to pray for her and for them who had left us, and for Mistress Audrey, who suffered more than we, although she bore all in a silence and patience that I feared were eating away her life. And it seemed to my dazed, half sleeping brain that nought could be real that had happened in the dreadful year that had passed, but that I must surely waken presently to find Marmaduke living and all our sorrow but a dream. So I fell asleep at last to meet worse visions than beset me by day; for methought that Marmaduke came to me looking stern, and strangely like Sir Miles, and rebuked both me and Muriel for that we were forsworn. I awoke with a wild scream that brought Mistress Audrey to our chamber, who chided me gently for that I gave way to foolish fears, though I told her not my dream; and she sat beside the bed until I sank at last into a quiet sleep.

CHAPTER XVI

ROGER'S WEDDING

IN the second week of August, Roger and Alison were married in the church in the village, and although we might not do as we should have done had those whom we had lost still lived, Mistress Audrey decreed that a marriage in mourning looked ill to the bride, so for that day Muriel and I wore white; and also that since a wedding is ever a festival, we must keep ours as such in as far as we might.

So there was music in the church, and the children strewed flowers in the pathway, and Mistress Audrey, Muriel, and I laid out a breakfast with flowers and dainty confections which it had taken all them who were at home and had leisure many days to prepare.

We made gifts to Alison, and Muriel would fain have bestowed upon her a string of rare pearls which had long lain in a casket in the oak cabinet and were hers now as heiress, or as I should rather have written, owner of Eversleigh. But Mistress Audrey explained to her, while I stood by, that pearls were not a fitting gift for a bride of Alison's degree. At this Muriel pouted and avowed that she could not understand how aught that was beautiful could be unbecoming to the sister of her

best Cicely, for such Alison henceforth would be.

Then Mistress Audrey answered that, although Cicely had no love for such trinkets and might never wear them perchance, yet might she gift me with such if she would; for that my mother, so long dead, had been truly an Eversleigh, and therefore of gentle degree.

I marveled that my good godmother should have spoken so before me, but she had some good reason for so doing, I ween, since never did she inflict pain on any unless certain withal that thereby good might be done. Then Muriel declared that she would not wait for my wedding, for that, she verily believed, would never take place, seeing that I was bound in heart and soul to them of Combe Eversleigh, and would never love any stranger as well. Therefore should the pearls be mine now.

I wondered again when Mistress Audrey consented thereto, for she loved not the giving of extravagant gifts. Moreover, she insisted that I should wear the pearls on the morrow when I should attend Alison to church as her bridemaiden with Muriel. And we learned then that with motherly care she had prepared like dresses for us both. Now never had I looked upon myself as anything but handmaiden to Muriel, although, for want of a better as things were, I had been brought up in such close company with her and our lost Marmaduke, and had ever been treated as a sister

by them both. So I dared to expostulate with Mistress Audrey when I found her alone, and said I felt shame to stand by the Mistress of Eversleigh as an equal, when by good right I should have been with Dame Gillian and the tirewomen, and habited as they. But my good godmother answered with more patience and sweetness than my impertinence deserved.

"Not so, my Cicely; thy mother was my cousin and I ever treated her as a most dear friend. I promised her that I would be good friend to thee, and I trust that I have always striven to keep my word, since I first loved thee for her sake, and now for these many years, for thine own. Thou art all that is left me since Marmaduke is gone, and what I have will be thine. It is well that all should learn to look upon thee as a kinswoman of our house, my Cicely, for I grow more feeble day by day, and who knows how soon I may be called?"

To this I could make no answer for weeping, but in my heart I prayed that when my dear mistress should go to heaven I might not long be left behind. She bade me dry my tears and give all thought to Alison, who must see no token of grief on her wedding-day; and I strove to obey.

All the village came to the Nuptial Mass on the morrow; Muriel and I were bridesmaids, and old Master Walters gave his granddaughter to Roger, to his no small content; for he was far ad-

vanced in years, and longed to see this, his only one, well provided for before his death. He gave her a good dowry, which was of much service to Roger at his first starting in life, and great hope had I that they would be prosperous and happy, as by God's blessing they were. I thought that this wedding and the merriment we enjoyed in the house of Master Walters—it was to be my Roger's henceforth—would bring color to the cheeks and light to the eyes of our Muriel, but in truth it did no such thing.

Very sweet in manner and courteous in behavior was she all the day, and graciously she waited on the bride. But more than once when none other was by I saw her cheek pale and her lip quiver, and her beautiful eyes fill with tears.

Then I knew that she was grieving because no token had come to her from the Lord de Bletchingley, and the sight of a bridal made her sad, not knowing when she might hope for her own. Mistress Audrey saw it also and sorrowed for Muriel, but she felt somewhat indignant with her too; for she never could forget that her love for this false lord had, in some fashion, caused the death of Sir Miles; ay, and of Marmaduke, and the memory made her heart sore, I knew. Another cross came to Muriel that day, although she knew it not till afterwards. Master Illsley, the friend of my godmother who had earnestly desired to dwell at Combe Eversleigh while we should be

abroad, wrote to Mistress Audrey a letter wherein he declared that, much to his discomfort and to the great detriment of his worldly affairs, he was compelled by the troubles of the times to spend yet some months in London, whither he had been summoned by the Council of the King's Grace, and now was bound to wait upon their pleasure. And for this cause he would not be able to come to Combe Eversleigh before the end of the month of January. With God's help he trusted that his arrival would not be later than that.

Wherefore Mistress Audrey and Father Norbert deemed it well that we should remain until October, since, although Roger would do all that might be done for the servants and the lands, yet it is an ill thing to leave a house without a master for long.

But fearing for the effect a longer stay in that quiet, and, do what we would to seem glad, sad house for Muriel, Mistress Audrey resolved to send her for some time to visit a lady of good family and some means who had long been a friend of her own, and who dwelt at the village of Dripton, some twenty miles from our house. I should go with her and Dame Gillian on account of her age; and three serving-men would ride with us lest the roads should prove unsafe.

Gladly would I have begged leave to remain with my godmother, who could ill spare both Dame Gillian and me, but she would not be prevailed on

to deprive Muriel of my company, for in all things it was her wont to think of the comfort and pleasure of others rather than of her own. And before we started on that journey, which seemed like going to the world's end to us, who had never before been so far in our lives, save Muriel, when she was too young to know what journeying meant, Father Norbert writ for her a letter to the Lord de Bletchingley, and sent it by a sure hand to his lodging in London.

In that letter he informed this gentleman that Mistress Muriel intended to travel into France and Brittany, and at what time she would depart. Methinks that Muriel would fain have put off the journey to Dripton until such time as an answer to this letter could arrive, and hoped, I doubt not, that her lover would himself come to Eversleigh forthwith. But neither Mistress Audrey nor Father Norbert would give ear unto this, and one week after Roger's wedding we set off.

It chanced that a gentleman who was well known to Mistress Audrey was journeying by the way that we must go, and he undertook to see us safely to the house of Mistress Seymour whither we were bound. And Roger would come for us when our visit should be ended; and we were to tarry with Mistress Seymour two weeks.

* * * * *

I mind but little of that journey to Dripton save that there was sunshine above and about us,

and that we rode through green lanes sweet with wild roses and honeysuckles although it was late in the year. The fields were yellow with corn, and the sad cooing of the wild pigeons sounded from the woodlands which skirted the way. The world was very beautiful, but methinks my heart was out of tune.

We came to Seymour Hall at six of the clock and found there an old house built round a courtyard, and set back from the road behind a somber belt of oak trees and elms. A portcullis hung over the great gateway, and the walls were pierced with loopholes whence the archers might send their arrows down upon the foe if any such should approach. We were met at the door by an ancient lady of severe aspect, attired in the costume which doubtless she had worn in the time of her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth of blessed memory, and she leaned upon a stick, for her steps were feeble. She greeted Muriel kindly and welcomed us all, making many inquiries after Mistress Audrey and seeming full sorrowful that my godmother had been unable to leave Combe Eversleigh at that time. Then did we follow her into a large chamber furnished in antique fashion which, she said, would be Muriel's and mine while we abode there.

Afterwards we went down to the great hall, where supper was spread for the household, and at the table we, as guests, held the place of honor after Mistress Seymour herself. Now we of

Combe Eversleigh ever believed our own to be a godly and well-behaved household, and that Mistress Audrey and Sir Miles had held all levity and unbecoming manners in check. But well I ween it would have appeared but an ill-ordered mansion to the good lady of Seymour Hall. She had spent many years in widowhood, and seldom saw any save them of her house, as I was informed by one who had served her from her girlhood, her tirewoman, Mistress Ellice, who came to our chamber to render such assistance as we needed, to Muriel and me. The loss of a lovely daughter and of two fair sons had saddened the life of her lady, she said, and the knowledge that the times were evil had impressed her so strongly that she deemed much penance to be necessary, and kept her household in a kind of bondage of strict rules and observances which she would by no means relax.

Grieved was I when I heard this, for the sake of Muriel, and right earnestly I wished that we had not come. But wishing was useless now.

When Dame Ellice left us alone Muriel crept to my side and slipping her arms about my neck as was her wont, she wept softly, murmuring:

“O Cicely, let us go home.”

I strove to comfort her, but to leave now, or indeed before the time appointed by our elders, was impossible, and nought remained but to make the best of what promised to be a bad case. So it was. For those two weeks, in good truth, we lived

by rule. At six of the clock we were called by Dame Ellice, and went from our chamber to the chapel, where the morning hours were recited, and we heard Mass. Then came a walk for health's sake among the oaks and elms and in the meadow, and then breakfast in the great hall, whereat all who had place in the household must be present, and we conversed solemnly and in low tones; we of the younger sort speaking only when spoken to by Mistress Seymour or the chaplain, and then in as few words as we might. After breakfast Mistress Seymour went to see to the affairs of her house, and Muriel and I retired to our chamber, where we talked together, or with Dame Gillian, who most often joined us, and who lamented the hap which had brought her there; and Muriel wished herself and all of us at home. At eleven of the clock we went again to the great hall for dinner, and afterwards sat with Mistress Seymour in a large chamber which she called the ladies' room, and there we and all the women of the household employed our fingers in embroidery or the fashioning of garments whereof this lady made great store for the poor, or in spinning wool and flax into fine thread while one read aloud to the others from some right serious and well-chosen book. Then came Vespers in the chapel; then supper in the hall; then Compline and to bed.

Day followed day, each in the same fashion, and I saw our bright Muriel droop and pine with

the dullness, and long for liberty like a caged bird. Our hostess marveled to see her fair cheek grow pale and her step heavy, and would fain have ordered doses of tisanes and other bitter medicaments; but to what avail? Fresh air and green turf with freedom to dance at will through the woods were the remedies needed, and failing these my glad bird of sunshine, even in those two short weeks, was fading away.

Never was captive more rejoiced to be set free than was I when our visit was ended, and we once more quitted Seymour Hall. I strove to rouse Muriel to laughter when Roger at last came for us and we rode forth from that weary belt of trees. But she would not even smile. I had cast a questioning look at Roger when I saw him first, for I longed to know if he brought tidings of the Lord de Bletchingley, but he only frowned and shook his head. I ween that Muriel read his looks right well.

The next morning was cloudy and threatened a storm. Our good hostess would gladly have persuaded us to stay, but Muriel besought Roger to go.

"Let us out into such sunshine as there is," she said; "even a storm will be better than such quiet as this."

So we set off after receiving many directions from a serving-man as to a shorter way by a bridle-road which would lead us across the country, and bring us out by an inn of good repute,

where we might rest at noontide and remain until next morning in case the storm should break, as they expected it would, at about that time. He offered to ride with us to the inn, but this Roger would not allow, as one of our grooms declared that he knew the road across country, having frequently traveled by that way when he was a boy.

If this were true, his memory must needs have been a bad one, for he led us so far astray that long before noon neither he nor any of our party could guess where we were, nor whether we were journeying toward Combe Eversleigh, or, as seemed more likely to most of us, not rather going farther away. The storm was rising in the distance, and already we could hear the rumbling of the thunder and feel the patter of the broad rain-drops, so that we were fain to urge our horses onwards in hope of reaching some shelter before the tempest should burst. A country varlet who passed us, or rather whom we passed in the narrow lane down which we were riding when the rain came on, told us that a large hostel stood not many hundred yards distant on the London road, but how far we were from Combe Eversleigh he could not say, never having heard tell of the place.

We hastened on to the inn, which was much larger than such houses generally are in the country, and saw that other travelers had also taken refuge there, for a groom was leading two horses toward the stables as we entered the inn yard.

Muriel was very pale and weary when we dismounted, and Roger bade the host who came to the door to greet us to lead us to some private chamber. This he proceeded willingly to do. He told us that the other travelers who were there were a gentleman and his man traveling to London and in great haste, but they had stopped here because the storm threatened to be a heavy one, and there was no other inn within many miles.

When Roger asked him further at what distance we then were from home he made answer that Combe Eversleigh was at the least thirty miles from this inn, and then we discovered that we had ridden north when we should have gone westwards, and so had come more than ten miles out of our way. This was ill-tidings, yet it might have been worse, for the inn was spacious and clean, the host obliging and courteous, and his wife, as we found upon acquaintance, a kind, motherly dame.

So, as the rain was now falling in torrents and the thunder scarcely ceased, even for a moment, to roar, Roger and Dame Gillian decided that we must remain there for the night with the willing consent of Muriel and me. God knows that I would rather a thousand times have gone on to Combe Eversleigh in the worst storm that ever raged than have tarried there, had I known what would come of it; but I ween it is in pity that the future is hidden from us by the providence of our merciful Lord.

CHAPTER XVII

DE BLETCHINGLEY AGAIN

WE, that is Muriel, Dame Gillian, Roger, and I, were conducted by mine host to a fair and spacious upper chamber, whose floor was well strewn with sweet-smelling herbs and fresh rushes, and presently a serving-maiden came to kindle a fire, whereof we were right glad, for the storm had made the atmosphere chilly, and our habits were damp with the rain.

She was a garrulous maiden, and Dame Gillian, who ever loved to learn all that concerned them that were about her, questioned her as to the gentleman whose horses we had seen, and was told that he was a great lord who had been called from London upon urgent business but a few days after his marriage, and was in haste to return to his bride. His name she knew not, neither would his groom tell the same, being of surly character, and despising all them who were country bred. Moreover, this damsel avowed that the great gentleman would not be known.

Dame Gillian listened with interest to the chatter of the girl, but I heard it wearily, for my heart was ill at ease. And yet, for some cause that even now I can not determine, I lost not one word.

Once upon a time, and that not so many months

a-gone, Muriel would have taken delight in such gossip, but she paid no heed to it now; and when dinner was served, although she was very weary and had eaten nothing since the early morning, and but little then, she scarcely tasted aught. She looked so pale and wretched when the meal was ended that I coaxed her to come to the chamber wherein we were to sleep, and lie down for a little space while I sat beside her holding her hand.

There presently she fell asleep, and late in the afternoon, seeing that the rain had ceased and the sun was shining feebly after the storm, I stole off, intending to go down to the doorway for a breath of fresh air, whereof I stood greatly in need.

The rain was still falling gently, and I could not go out, so after standing for a few moments under the shadow of the porch I returned, not willing to be found there alone. When I reached the place where Roger and Dame Gillian were sitting I would have joined them, fearing to awaken Muriel, and so softly opened the door of the chamber wherein I believed them to be.

But I had mistaken the right hand of the stairway for the left, and found myself at the entrance of a chamber like ours in spaciousness and furnishing, but a gentleman was sitting there alone. He was seated near the wide window with his face turned toward the glass, as though watching the sky, and when I spoke softly, craving his pardon for thus intruding by mistake, he started and

glanced hurriedly round, when I was like to have fallen in my surprise,—for there before me in very truth was that false Lord de Bletchingley!

Methinks that he was no less astonished than I, for he found at first no words, but that lasted not long. Rising from his chair he came toward me bowing with more mockery than courtesy:

“Mistress Cicely Ibbetson does too much honor to the poor Ralph de Bletchingley in thus paying him an unlooked-for visit in an inn. Prithce, fair lady, give me, if you can, some news of Combe Eversleigh. I trust that all our friends there are well?”

I wot well that my country breeding, or, it may have been, the truth and honesty of the folk with whom I had lived till then, had made me a most simple girl. When he spoke to me in this wise, albeit his tone was mocking and there was an evil light in his false eyes, I deemed that what had happened at Combe Eversleigh since he left it must by some strange chance be unknown to him; and I scarcely knew how to frame my reply. At last I said, marking with anger at myself that my voice quavered sadly:

“I fear, my lord, that a letter writ to you of late by our good Father Norbert in behalf of Mistress Muriel Eversleigh can not have reached your hand; nor several others wherein information was sent to you of the sad losses the family have sustained in the year just past, in the death of Sir

Miles Eversleigh and also that of Marmaduke his son."

There was an evil smile on the man's lip as he listened to my words and yet it seemed to me that his face grew somewhat pale as he made reply.

"Certes, Mistress Cicely, those letters reached my hand; and even had they miscarried I have not lived so far out of the world as to be in ignorance of what has gone on therein. Of the death of Sir Marmaduke Eversleigh I must needs have heard, and it would be somewhat strange had I not known of that of Sir Miles. Believe me, we of the court are well posted in all that concerns us to know. Methinks it is to the country that news travels slowly—as you will confess—so you will graciously accord me permission to tell you a tale."

"Methinks, my lord," I answered with a strange, cold feeling of terror stealing over me, I knew not wherefore—I was not in fear of that false man—"methinks that your tale, whate'er it be, were better addressed to my lady, Mistress Eversleigh, who is even now in this house, and who hath long waited some tidings from you."

His face became paler, I could see, and a dark circle gathered under his eyes; drops of sweat stood out upon his forehead, and he, even he, bad as he was, shook so much at mention of her name that he was forced to lean, to steady himself, upon the high back of a chair that stood near. For a

moment he spoke not, then he gathered voice and said:

"Grieved am I that Mistress Muriel Eversleigh should have taken in grave earnest what any London lady would have known to be the mere jest and frolic of the hour. But to you and to you only must my tale be told. When you have heard it you may carry it to whom you list."

"Shame upon thee, for a false friend and for a knight forsworn!" I cried. "I will listen to nought that comes from lips like thine that could so deceive a noble lady. Let me pass." For he had crossed the chamber, and now stood with folded arms and frowning brow between me and the door.

"Not until you have heard my tale, Mistress Cicely of the sharp tongue," he answered. "And if you will not hear it, then will I go to the common hall of this hostelry and relate the true story of Combe Eversleigh before mine host and the grooms. You came into my chamber for your pleasure—trust me, you shall remain in it for mine. Yet am I not so jealous of the high honor of your society that I would detain you longer than needs must. Neither would I keep a lady standing. Will you sit?"

My lips refused to answer out of very loathing of the man, but I could not sit with him, and by a gesture made him understand the same. I heard a slight sound as of the rustle of a robe at the door, and glanced around to see if any eavesdropper

might be there; but a heavy curtain of leather hung before the entrance of the chamber and was closely drawn. He, too, looked behind him at the door, and then went on.

"It may well be, good Mistress Cicely, that you have heard little of what chanced to the late Sir Marmaduke during his school and college days; nor will I trouble you with such stories now. But this you must know, that while at Oxford he injured a de Bletchingley, and it is not our wont to forgive. When I left the place wherein my name had been held in honor until then, I swore to be revenged. Judge whether I have kept my oath. I won from him his promised bride; I brought upon the name of Eversleigh the dishonor he had brought on mine; and last of all I slew him. Not a hundred paces from this very house did the man who had sought to ruin my life receive his death-wound at my hand."

He paused for a few moments and looked upon the ground. I stood transfixed with horror at his tale, and at the man who told it not as a thing to glory in, but as a thing that must be said. I heard a rustle at the curtain but I could not move, not so much as a finger—my blood seemed frozen, and my brain was numb.

He glanced behind him, and again went on.

"For Mistress Muriel Eversleigh—bear her, I pray you, my profound regrets; tell her I dreamed not she would ever take our play for earnest. I

was wedded to the Lady Emmeline de Trafford some three weeks a-gone. My tale is told. I thank thee for thy patience. Farewell, good Cicely."

And with another mocking bow he was gone by a side door ere I could speak.

Then I remembered that Roger might meet him, might see him in the courtyard as he was riding away, for I never doubted but he would leave the house at once.

Like one in a trance I turned to leave the chamber, with a half unconscious intent to save more bloodshed if I might, and then I saw such a sight as I pray God of His goodness I may never see again. Holding up the curtain as if her arm were made of wood or stone, with her lips parted in horror, her eyes fixed and stony, her cheek colorless as are the faces of the dead, stood Muriel.

She neither spoke nor moved when I approached and whispered her name, but when I put my arms round her and implored her to answer me, she sank lifeless to the floor at my feet. I ran across the landing and called Roger, who sat in our chamber dozing over the fire with Dame Gillian, and though I was almost beside myself with terror and grief, I was conscious of a feeling of wonder at their slumbering then. I must have frightened them, for both sprang up and came half dreaming toward me, and all I could do was to murmur something that none could understand, and point to Muriel lying on the floor.

The sight awoke Roger. Without a word he stooped, and lifting her in his strong arms carried her to our sleeping-room upstairs. Dame Gillian followed but I could not walk, and sank upon the lowest step wondering stupidly what they would do without me when Muriel should awake.

Roger left her to Dame Gillian and came back to me. He drew me into the chamber where he had been sitting and strove to learn the reason of it all. I could not tell him. I was half stupid, and the little sense that remained to me was with Muriel. So he was fain to lead me upstairs to the chamber where she still lay senseless on the bed.

Dame Gillian was a woman of sense and discretion; she said little and did what she could. It was but little we could do; and that little had no effect on Muriel. For long hours she lay insensible, and when at last she opened her eyes and looked at me it was only to murmur wistfully like a grieved child: "Cicely, I love not this Seymour Hall. I am weary. Prithee, ask Marmaduke to take us home."

All that night I sat beside her, soothing her with such loving words as one might speak to a child; and in the morning early Roger ordered the horses and with broken hearts for the new sorrow that had come upon us we set out on our way home. And as we rode Muriel spoke not a word. She neither wept nor smiled, nor could we persuade her to eat. We stopped at an inn at noontide and

then she looked at me with reproachful wonder and whispered, "Cicely, you said we should go home; this place is not Combe Eversleigh." And when I answered that we truly were going home, but must rest a while upon the road, she put up her lip like a grieved child and turned patiently away.

Roger would gladly have remained that night at the inn, but she would not; and in all the weary weeks that ensued this was the only time when she showed that she could be violent if her will was crossed. She would not go upstairs, and when Roger strove to make her understand that for the day and night this house must be our resting-place she laid hold of the settle whereon I had been sitting and would not let it go. Very gently I took her wrist to lead her away, and then she screamed, a wild unearthly scream, and fainted. Dame Gillian declared that she would have fever of the brain if she had it not already and that come what might we must go home.

So when Muriel recovered (and the swoon lasted not long), we mounted again and rode toward Combe Eversleigh with heavy hearts. I could find no chance to tell Roger what had happened, for Muriel would not bear me from her side.

Dame Gillian busied herself with the child and asked no question of me. She told me afterwards she had seen that false lord mounting in the inn-yard as she went upstairs after Roger, and so guessed in part what had gone on.

CHAPTER XVIII

GOING TO MARMADUKE

METHINKS there never was any funeral procession half so mournful as was that ride to Eversleigh to Roger and Dame Gillian and me.

We reached the lodge at the great gates at evening, though as yet the sun had not disappeared, and I whispered to Dame Gillian to ride forward and speak to Mistress Audrey before we should come up. She was worn out by her long ride, poor Dame Gillian, and the errand I gave her was well-nigh as sad as could be. But she was ever ready in the service of the house of Eversleigh, as I thank God were all them that served it, and she went on while we came slowly behind.

My dear godmother came to meet us at the door and only that her sweet face was drawn and her lip trembled, none could have guessed that she had heard evil tidings but now. Evil? Well, I ween she would have chided me for calling that evil which had come from God. To my weak faith it ever seemed that with our great sorrows the wickedness of man had much to do. When Roger lifted Muriel from the saddle she thanked him gently, and then turned to my dear godmother and said softly:

“Aunt Audrey, hath Marmaduke come home?”

Shamed am I to own that I sobbed aloud to hear her, for I had deluded myself with vain hopes that her wits would return at sight of home. Alas! They were gone forever. And from that moment she faded away. Meek and gentle as a child in sorrow, a child whose little heart hath been grieved and wounded by unkindness or harsh words, she was. Tears which seldom fell came ever to her eyes at sound of our voices, more especially when we strove to win her to take food, or compose herself to sleep. She knelt at my side to say her prayers as she had been wont to do when first she came to us a tiny babe, and she followed me about the house as she had done then. But she seldom spoke save now and then, when she crept to my side and whispered:

“Cicely, hath Marmaduke come home?”

And I could not speak for sobbing at the piteousness of it. But Mistress Audrey did not sob, though well I ween her heart was breaking. She kissed the fair forehead and smoothed the dark ringlets as she had done years ago, and promised Muriel that she should see Marmaduke as soon as might be, only he was away on other business and could not come to us now.

Then Muriel was satisfied, but distressed to see me weep, and strove to comfort me in her pretty way, which so increased my trouble that I had much ado to keep my senses at times.

When we passed the door of Sir Miles's old

chamber or the hall wherein the books were kept and where he had spent so many hours every day when alive, Muriel would step softly on tiptoe with finger on her lip, whispering:

"Hush, Cicely, I pray thee; I would not be heard by Sir Miles. He loves me not. And he is angered with me now."

So the days passed on at Combe Eversleigh, while we watched our blossom fading in anguish such as I trust doth not fall often to the lot of poor human hearts; and every day we saw her step grow more feeble, and her form more slight, until the time came when she could no longer follow me and Mistress Audrey through the corridors or come down the stairs into the great hall. We knew that she was dying; the leech avowed that the end must come soon, and Mistress Audrey prayed by night and day that God in His mercy would grant some gleam of reason to the stricken soul that so she might make her peace with Him before the last.

She knelt by Muriel's bed one sunny afternoon in October, gazing at the worn face, from which every trace of color had departed, so that it looked like alabaster rather than like flesh and blood, and for once her tears dropped silently while she prayed. Mayhap she deemed that Muriel was asleep. I, who always lay in her chamber and had watched her through the long unrestful nights, knew that it was not so.

Presently the child opened her eyes and said, "Wherefore art thou weeping, Aunt Audrey? Will not Marmaduke come home?"

"I weep, my darling," Mistress Audrey answered, "because we must lose thee. Thou art going to him it may be to-day."

Then Muriel sat up on her bed and called for me. I came to her side and she said:

"Cicely, hast thou heard the good tidings? I am to go to Marmaduke. I am going to him to-day. Dress me, I pray thee, in the robe he brought for me. Thou knowest he loves no other dress so well."

I strove to content her, and told her that ere she started on her journey she should be attired in Marmaduke's dress, but nothing would do save that I should put it on her then as she lay upon her bed. So Mistress Audrey bade me even do as she willed.

I smoothed out her long bright tresses, and fastened them back with the spray of jewels which she had worn with that robe when first she put it on, and then she would stand by the bedside to be dressed. Ah me, how like a child she was, and when attired how beautiful!

She was half fainting with weariness when my task was done, and as she lay down she kissed my hand and murmured:

"Do not let them take it off again, Cicely; when I go to meet Marmaduke I will wear no other dress than this."

Sobbing I promised her, and then she fell asleep. It was almost the first quiet sleep I had known her to take since that terrible day at the inn, and I made signs to Mistress Audrey that surely our darling must get better now.

She was fain to hope with me, and for two hours, until twilight was gathering, we sat beside the bed. Then came her awakening and ours. Suddenly, with a wild cry, Muriel sat up in her bed with her hand outstretched toward the door.

"Save me, Cicely," she screamed, "oh, save me! Marmaduke is there and he is angry. I never saw him look so sternly on me before. Sir Miles is behind him, and threatens me. O Marmaduke, forgive. . . ."

She fell back.

Those were the last words we ever heard from the lips of our Muriel. Four days later we laid her beside Marmaduke in the vault in the old church, and Combe Eversleigh was more desolate than it had ever been. Them of the household had always loved the fair child who had come like sunshine among us, and had wound herself about our hearts more tightly perchance than it is right that anything of earth should do. But they had loved her more than ever in these last sad days, when the sweetness and simplicity of infancy had returned to her, and moreover they grieved for Mistress Audrey and me.

Dame Gillian chided the maidens for weeping

when her own eyes were wet, and even while speaking to Muriel's tirewoman sharply for distressing Mistress Audrey she herself broke down with a sob. When we came back from the church my good godmother kissed my forehead and said gently: "I pray thee take some care of thy health, my Cicely; thou art all that is left to me now."

We went to the chapel and tried to pray for them that were gone, but it ended in weeping. Yet well I hope that our merciful God, who hath compassion on the sore hearts of His children, accepted as supplications the tears we shed that day. At last night came and Mistress Audrey sent all early to rest, for we had slept but little during many nights, and I, watching by Muriel, scarcely at all.

Therefore was it that, worn out by weeping and sorrow as well as with the weariness of long unrest, I had scarce laid my head upon the pillow whereon Muriel's had lain not many days before, than I fell into a dreamless sleep.

And now I pray all them who have entreated me to write this history, and also any who may chance hereafter to read the same, not to look upon that which I am about to relate as the dreaming fancy of a heartsick maiden, too much worn by sorrow to have clear knowledge or certainty of that which befell. In years I was a woman, and much grief and many troubles had rendered me even older than my years. Wearied I was with watching and

weeping, but neither sick in body nor disordered in mind, as many could have borne witness at that time, though alas, not one is left to give testimony now. But I know that the thing truly happened, and was no effect of my fancy, even as I write it down.

How long I had slept I know not, when I was half awakened by a noise in my chamber, and as it seemed to me, close to my bed, as of weeping and sobbing, and the stifled moans of one in pain. I lay without moving or even feeling conscious of fright, so heavy was I, until I heard my name spoken ever so gently, as if the speaker were afraid of disturbing any but me; and then I started up in my bed, for I knew that the voice which called was Muriel's.

I forgot that she was dead; forgot that we had laid her that day in the vault in her coffin; forgot everything except that she was in trouble and calling for me.

When I sat up I saw her. She was standing between the bed and the window and the rays of the moonlight fell in long streams through the narrow casement upon the long dark hair that lay damp and disordered upon her shoulders, and glinted on the threads of gold in her dress—Marmaduke's dress, in which we had buried her because I would not break the promise I had made that she should wear it when she went to meet him.

Ah me, she must have seen him now. She was weeping and wringing her hands in utmost extremity of woe, and stretching out my arms that she might come to me I cried aloud:

"What aileth thee, sweet Muriel! Come hither, I entreat thee, and tell me thy sorrow. Stay with me till morning and then we will to Mistress Audrey and she will comfort thee if any can."

But Muriel came not forward, nor answered, but only wept in agony, and sobbed bitterly still wringing her hands. Then I said again:

"O Muriel, for God's sake speak to me and tell me what I may do. It kills me to see thee like this."

She turned her eyes all filled with tears toward me then, and said:

"O Cicely, wilt thou not help me! I am all alone, and sore afraid."

"Tell me what I can do for thee, sweet one," I answered; "and if it be in mortal power it shall be done."

"Then come with me," she answered. "O Cicely, it is terrible to be alone! Alone! Alone!"

"Surely I will come with thee, Muriel," I said. "But wilt thou not rest here till morning? It must be nearly midnight; we can go nowhere to-night."

For all answer she wrung her hands, and wept, and moaned until I could not bear it, and so I

sprang from the bed and put on my slippers, determined to follow whithersoever she would, and yet wondering the while what Mistress Audrey and Dame Gillian would say, for my godmother little loved that any should wander about the house in the night-time, and her rules about such practices were strict.

Muriel turned as though to leave the chamber, and I followed her, forgetful of my night-gear and thinking of nothing but her trouble and wondering what she willed that I should do.

Through the door and down the great stairway she went, still weeping silently and wringing her hands, and sometimes wailing in a voice that spoke to my heart rather than to mine ear.

"O Cicely, come with me! I am frightened. It is terrible to be all alone!"

And so through the corridors till we arrived at the great door which was well locked and bolted, and farther than that I knew we could not go. I had followed Muriel so closely that now and then I had feared to tread upon the skirt of her robe as we came down the stair, and I thought to have touched her arm as we stood at the door, but when I put out my hand, and was about to remind her that the keys were in the steward's chamber and that we could not get out of the house by that way till morning, she was gone!

It seemed to me that I heard her voice without calling to me, and crying:

"O Cicely, come with me and help me. It is so terrible to be alone."

I cried aloud: "O Muriel, Muriel, come back to me!" And then came to me the memory that that day we had buried her, and I knew that what I had seen and heard was not of earth.

Now had any one, even Mistress Audrey or Father Norbert himself, told me in the days that were gone that a time might come when I should feel fear of our Muriel, whether she were alive or dead, verily I had paid no heed to his words. But God knows I was frightened then.

A wild feeling of terror lest she should come back to me took possession of my soul. I could not stir; I could not call out; I could not even cry to heaven for help. I stood there like a thing of stone, for how long I know not; but at last I heard the great clock strike twelve. Then voice came to me and with all my strength I screamed aloud, and fell senseless to the ground.

When consciousness returned I was lying on the bed in Mistress Audrey's chamber, and she with many others were gathered about me doing what they could to recall me to life. When I opened my eyes I looked shudderingly around, for I knew not where I was, and expected to see none but Muriel; and my first words were:

"Where is she?"

Mistress Audrey laid her hand upon my forehead and said:

"What has frightened thee, Cicely? There is no one here except myself, and the servants who found thee lying senseless at the door. Thou hast been walking in thy sleep, and thy brain is overwrought with sorrow. Try now to rest."

"But where is Muriel?" I repeated, scarce daring to look around, so fearful was I that she might be there. "Where is Muriel? She is alone on the terrace or in the garden, and I dare not go to her, for now I know that she is dead."

Mistress Audrey strove to soothe me, for she thought that I was raving and feared that trouble might perchance have brought on fever, and that I, too, should die. She sent away all but Dame Gillian, who could not be persuaded to leave us alone, and then she sat down by the bed and bade me sleep. Fain would I have told Mistress Audrey what I had seen, but she would not allow me to speak. And so we continued until morning, when they sent for the leech, who declared that the many troubles that had befallen had been too much for my brain, and that if I remained at Combe Eversleigh I should surely die.

As all things were in readiness for our journey to Brittany, and only Muriel's illness had prevented our starting before, Mistress Audrey determined forthwith to set out, leaving all luggage to be sent after us save what we could not possibly do without. Dame Gillian, who was to have stayed at Combe Eversleigh, would now by no means be

left behind. It was not meet, she said, that Mistress Audrey should travel alone with a sick girl. I was not sick and I knew it, but they would not listen to me. So for that day and night I remained in Mistress Audrey's chamber, and the next day we left Combe Eversleigh and only once since have I seen it again.

CHAPTER XIX

ADIEU TO COMBE EVERSLEIGH

It boots not to say what I felt when we left Combe Eversleigh, although my old heart saddens at the memory of it even now. What must that parting have been to my godmother, who had known all the joys and sorrows of her life in that place, and now was forced to leave it before the monuments of her dead were set above their graves? That she was hastening her departure for my sake gave another pang to my sorrow, but whatever she felt she gave no token of new trouble, only she grew more feeble and aged every day. She treated me no longer as a humble kinswoman and lowly friend, but rather as a most dear daughter, and watched me so anxiously that I was fain to assume an air of cheerfulness and content when my heart was saddest lest she should deem that I was sick.

By easy stages we traveled to London, Mistress Audrey, her serving-woman, and I, with two grooms of our own and two more of Master Illsley's, who had been called thither by their master, and journeyed with us, to their great contentment and ours. We were to wait in London for Roger and Dame Gillian, who would follow us with Muriel's woman, now transferred to my service, by will of

Mistress Audrey and her own desire, as soon as things were in order at Combe Eversleigh.

Much weeping there was when we said farewell to the servants who were left behind in the old house. Most of them were soon to serve, for the first time in their lives, a master who bore another name than Eversleigh; and they being not used to conceal aught that went on in their simple minds and loving hearts added to our grief by theirs. Master Illsley had found lodgings for us in the great city, where we could abide in privacy at small distance from a church, whither we daily repaired for Mass in the morning, and for reciting the Hours. To other places we went not at all; and I for mine own part had never in my life seen any town which I misliked so much as this same London, with its crowded streets and busy people, all of whom looked as if they must needs have no time to sorrow for the troubles of their brethren, so wrapped up were they in matters of their own.

More than a week we abode there, and then Roger came and found places for us in a vessel which was to leave the docks in a day or two, and in that we set sail for Brittany and reached that country after suffering much misery on the sea. The house in which we were to sojourn for the time was an ancient chateau not far from the sea, which belonged to Roger's wife Alison, and had been in the family of her mother for many

generations, and when the de Kerugals were of greater wealth and importance than of late they had been. It stood back from the road near to a village whose inhabitants were for the most part simple farmers and fishing-folk, who came on the morrow to catch a glimpse, if they might, of the strangers who had come to live among them from beyond the sea. They were a devout and kindly people, and we learned to love them well when we had grown accustomed to their manners and could understand their speech, as Mistress Audrey, Kate, and I speedily did, though Dame Gillian and Joan never could.

But this happened not at once. Roger stayed with us a week to see that all things were in order, and to settle us in our new abode as far as he could. Then he returned to England, and when I said farewell to him and saw him take the road which, albeit still strange to me, led, as I knew, to home and Combe Eversleigh, I shame to tell I swooned away. After that I was sick, for how long I know not, for I was in a fever and unconscious of all that went on. When I came to my senses, after what seemed to me like a long sleep that had been disturbed by fearful dreams, I knew not where I was, nor could I recognize the ancient lady who sat by my bed bending anxiously over me, until, when I fixed my eyes upon her face, she smiled and kissed my forehead saying fervently:

"Thanks be to God, my Cicely, whose mercy hath spared thee to me yet a while."

Then I knew that mine own good godmother sat beside me thus wofully changed. I was too weak to say aught; almost too weak to wonder or think. But presently I fell into a natural sleep and from that day I recovered.

Now often hath it struck me as passing strange that, in all the terrible times we had known, Mistress Audrey had nursed the sick, cheered them that desponded, comforted the sorrowful, watched beside the dead; and yet never once had she given way. She was the only one of all them who had suffered most that had not been so ill as to take to her bed. But sorrow had done for her the work of time. When I became well enough to look about me and take note of what I saw, I found that she had become an aged woman, whose form was bowed as if with the weight of years, and who could no longer walk without a stick. Her hair was white as snow, and her hand shook as theirs do who have been stricken with palsy. When I grew stronger she was glad to lean upon my arm, for without support she could not go. She must have nursed me through many weeks, for when I was able to sit up Christmas was over—our first Christmas in a strange land; the first that for many, many years either of us had spent away from Combe Eversleigh.

As soon as I was strong enough Mistress Au-

drey told me that while we tarried in London she had caused a notary to make her will, and that all she possessed, and might give to whom she would, would be mine. She told me, too, what I might have known had I not ever been slow to think of such matters, that now Combe Eversleigh was hers for her life only; and that on her death the old house must pass to some distant relatives of the name whom she knew not and had never seen—the nephews of that Ralph Eversleigh whose daughter I had once believed our Muriel to be. She said that if I willed it strongly we would return to Combe Eversleigh in the summer, though she deemed that we should both be the better for a longer sojourn here at Kerugal, where all was peaceful and quiet, and for the bracing air of the sea.

In mine own heart I opined that no air could be as good for me as the air of Combe Eversleigh, but I saw too plainly how much she dreaded our return. So we stayed. Roger came to us in the summer, and brought grievous tidings of the doings of the King's Grace and his evil-minded council at home. The priory had been confiscated, he told us, and the abbey was held by the Benedictines no more. More than one abbot of the great monasteries in England had been hanged in front of his own door because he would by no means be forced or cajoled into a betrayal of the Church of God; and many of the brethren, our own Father Norbert

for one, were even then suffering imprisonment for the faith.

By good hap Master Illsley was well pleased with Combe Eversleigh (I wondered who would not have been, when Roger said that), and would gladly stay there as long as Mistress Eversleigh would. Only part of the house he had shut up since he needed not to occupy so many chambers as there were. Methought that Roger looked askance at me as he said this, but he made no pause in his speech, and afterwards his glance passed out of my mind.

Dame Gillian and Joan went back to England with Roger when he returned, and went into the service of Master Illsley, for I was well then, and neither of them could learn the Breton speech. We stayed on, since the times were so troublous, and I thought that Mistress Audrey—Mistress Eversleigh now—was glad that so it should be. We learned to know the farmers and fisher-folk, and they, too, soon grew to know us and to love us well. They set great store on our knowledge of medicines, and in all their ailments came to us for assistance or relief. We often heard from Roger how things were going at home, and the report was ever the same. All things were well at Combe Eversleigh, but for the country all things went ill.

My sweet godmother grew more and more feeble, and soon I knew that she would never see Combe

Eversleigh again. My heart was there always. Many a time as I wandered by the sea, for Mistress Audrey insisted that I should walk on every fine day, even when she was too weak to leave her chair, I lost myself in reverie, and was far away in fancy in the woods at Combe Eversleigh making May garlands with Muriel, or gathering fresh flowers to deck the chambers as of old. And at night many and many a time I lay awake listening to the sound of the waves as they broke upon the shore, and fancying that far above their roaring I could hear the voice of Muriel wailing as I had heard it last. "O Cicely, good Cicely, wilt thou not come with me, and help me? I am so frightened! And it is terrible to be alone."

Masses were said and sung for her soul and for the souls of Marmaduke and Sir Miles; and night and day we prayed for them, Mistress Audrey and I. Roger sent us such sums as we needed, and our lives passed quietly enough. We heard of the death of the King's Majesty in course of time, and how a new religion had been established by law, and things were but little better under the boy-king, his son. We learned too, that God had blessed Roger and Alison with a fine family, and that they were prospering in all things; and then, after the lapse of years, that Master Walters and Dame Gillian were dead.

I had grown very old before this; not in years but in sorrow. Kate, our last maid from Combe

Eversleigh, married a wealthy farmer of Kerugal, and we took a pretty Breton maiden from the village in her stead; it was more lonely than ever after that, although Kate lived not far from our chateau and came to see us every day.

Mistress Audrey, seeing little hope of our return to England, had bought the Chateau de Kerugal from Roger, or rather had exchanged for it a fine farm which belonged to her in England; and this she would not do until she had consulted me, because, she said, I was her heir.

Life seemed very strange to me. I often wondered, in idle, dreamy fashion, if the sober, staid, sad woman with gray hair, who passed in and out of the church and cottages at Kerugal, speaking a strange tongue, and half forgetting the manners of her own land, were truly the same creature as that blithe, thoughtless girl who had frolicked with Muriel and Marmaduke at Combe Eversleigh long ago. For very, very long ago it seemed to me.

King Edward died in his boyhood, and Queen Mary succeeded and brought back the true religion to our most unhappy land. Master Illsley was dead, too, and the way was open for our return to Combe Eversleigh. But Mistress Audrey was too feeble then to go beyond her room. In the last year of Queen Mary she sent a messenger to Roger saying that she would gladly speak with him once more, bidding him come quickly if he would see her alive. He came, bringing his young son, who

willed to give himself to the service of God in the priesthood if grace should be vouchsafed him, and was to study in a college in France for that end.

It seemed strange to me that Roger should be grown to middle age with a son almost a man. Yet so it was.

I had little time to remark it, for my dear god-mother grew worse. Why should I linger over matters of slight interest to any but me? She died after receiving the last consolations of that Church which had been her support in life, and with her last breath blessed her poor child, and besought Roger and me to take her remains and bury them beside Sir Miles at Combe Eversleigh.

Kate and her husband came to live at the chateau for the time of my absence, and all but two of the servants were to leave as soon as they could find fitting service. Then Roger and I set out on our sorrowful journey, which yet was not to me as heartbreaking as that other had been. Mistress Audrey had died at a good old age, and we had long looked for her end. Moreover, that end was a holy one. Except that I had now lost the dearest, best, and last of my friends, there was nought but comfort to look back upon; and there was comfort in the future, for I, too, was growing old, nearly five and forty years had I lived in the world, and had good hope that ere many more I might join them whom I loved best in a better.

God in His providence had other designs, but I

knew it not then. Hence it happened that on the death of my dear godmother I was less tempted than heretofore to sorrow as they do who are without hope.

CHAPTER XX

ONCE MORE AT COMBE EVERSLEIGH

THE history of that sad journey is of little import to any one now, for the sorrow was mine and I saw little beyond it. Two priests went with us to the port of Calais in Normandy, whence we crossed to Dover, and there were met by two of our own Benedictines, who journeyed with us all the way, saying Mass for the dead every morning in the church wherein the bier rested for the night. Once we might have slept at some monastery or convent each night of our journey; but the convents and monasteries were no more, for they had been all despoiled by King Henry and his son; and Queen Mary had not yet been able to undo the wrong that had been done. Wherefore we, that is, I and the two women who were with me, lodged at the inns, with Roger to guard us, though there was little danger, I trow; and the two priests took turn in watching the coffin in the church.

In one of those inns an adventure befell which had an influence on some few years of my after-life and won for me a true friend in the last person to whom I ever expected—or for that matter, willed—to become known. It happened in this wise. We were halting for the night at a little

village some fifty miles from Dover, for we always avoided, as far as we might, the great towns, and after the evening service for the dead had been chanted in the church, we went as usual to the inn (there was but one in the place) for supper and beds.

My host declared that what he could he would do for us, but that his best chambers had already been taken by a noble lady and them of her following, and that we must put up with scant accommodation for that night. Roger told me this on the way from the church, and earnestly advised that I should go forward with one maid and a groom to the next village, where chambers in plenty and very commodious were to be had. But knowing that the hearse could not go farther that night, I was unwilling to leave behind the corpse of my dear Mistress Audrey, for it seemed almost like a desertion of the living to me. So I told Roger that I and the maids could do with one chamber, if so much was to be had, and that the men might be satisfied with scant quarters for one night, so some place could be found for him and the Fathers, who must needs be more wearied than we.

Methought that Roger was unwilling for me to stay, but it was not his way to dispute and he saw plainly that my mind was made up.

Our chamber at the inn was small enough, but clean and well ordered, and we must e'en eat where we were to sleep, since better accommodation was

not. Roger and the men found beds in some cottages near, where the peasants were glad to suffer a slight discomfort for the sake of good pay, and the priest of the place gave shelter to the Fathers who had accompanied us. So we were told.

But Roger remained sitting by the fire in the common room of the inn, for he was unwilling to leave me and the maids alone among strangers at night. We were all wearied and worn out, and it may be, like the blessed Apostles, heavy with sorrow, for the two maids fell asleep almost as soon as we were left alone (we lay down on the rude beds provided for us without undressing) and methinks the sound of their breathing must have acted like a soothing spell on me.

When we had slept some three or four hours I was aroused by the sound of a great knocking at the door of our chamber, and Roger's voice calling to us to rise quickly and come down, for that the house was on fire. And so it proved to be. The smoke had already filled our chamber, and by the time I had awakened the maids and made them understand what the matter was, and this they could not speedily do, being heavy with sleep, flames were creeping under the door and we were half-stifled. One of the women, Berthe, acted in prudent fashion, and went as she was told quickly to the door, where Roger caught her and bore her through the smoke and fire down the stairs; the other, Marie, lost her wits with fright, and clung

to me, sobbing and screaming so that I feared we should both be smothered or burned. When Roger came back I carried her by main force to the door and placed her in his arms, while he called to me to follow, for he feared he should not be able to return, and the windows were too narrow to permit of escape by that way.

I pushed my way to a landing on the next floor, but there a fresh burst of flame prevented me from going farther, and I was fain to pass through an open door into a passage where the smoke seemed to be less dense, that I might breathe, for I was spent by my struggle with the girl Marie, who even yet had not sense in any way to help herself, but lay in Roger's arms like a log. While I paused for a moment I heard the cry of a child coming from a part of the house at some distance from where we had been, and fearing that some little one had been forgotten and perhaps left to perish, I called to Roger not to come back, for I would find a way out, and went in the direction of the cry.

It came from a chamber opening out of that passage and, entering with difficulty because of the smoke, I groped my way across until I nearly stumbled over a little bed, and then the child screamed again.

I took it up, wrapping the coverlet round it, and so heavily laden, for the child was not a babe, I staggered to the door. How I made my way to

the inn-yard I know not, mayhap the child's angel guided me, but there I presently found myself after slipping and stumbling down some stairs and a passage with my hair singed, and a burn on my arm, which I discovered not until afterwards, for then I was tingling all over and full of pain.

They told me that I fell to the ground as I came into the fresh air, but happily the child was uninjured, having been well wrapped up in the quilt from his bed. When I came to myself and looked about me I was lying on a settle in a small chamber, which I afterwards learned was in the dwelling of one of the servants belonging to the inn, and a lady younger than I and with a most sweet countenance, now full of solicitude for me, was bending over me and wiping my face and forehead with a sponge.

I moved uneasily, and asked for the child who had been so near perishing, and she answered with her voice full of tears that he was well, and that I had saved him from a most awful death. And now that she was sure that I had met with no serious injury she would leave me and go to him, but, if she might, she would presently come to me again.

I tried to sit up but my head was dizzy, and I was fain to lie down again, longing for Roger to come and tell me how things had gone. I had not to wait long, for he hastened to my side when the lady had left me and said that he had met with

no hurt except a few bruises, and that the maids were safe; adding that he verily believed that a singed wig or a grazed forehead had been well bestowed on the girl Marie, so the same had given her a little more sense.

When I strove to learn somewhat of the child and his mother, he answered away from the point, and I saw there was something he would hide from me and begged to know what it was.

"They will tell thee in any case, Cicely," he said then, while his lip quivered and his face grew pale; "and thou hast learned sanctity in such fashion from the sweet lady who hath left us that it may be thou wilt bear the tidings with more patience than I. The boy whose life thou didst save to-day at the risk of thine own is the only son of the false de Bletchingley. And I wot well it were far better for him that he had perished in the flames than live to grow up like the rest of his race."

Surely we be strange beings who call ourselves Christians and would have others believe us to be such. For one instant—I trust well the feeling lasted not more—I wished that I had followed Roger's counsel and gone forward the night before. I write this to my shame. After twenty years' of praying night and morning for mine enemies I had reached no further than that!

But I thank God that I blushed at mine own wickedness ere the thought was well formed. Yet

I could not speak of any de Bletchingley then when the remembrance had so suddenly been brought back of the mischief one of them had wrought—of the bright young lives cut off in their springtime, of the exile borne so long by Mistress Audrey and me.

"I thanked God who spared the life of a child, Roger, no matter who he may be," I said, "and it may be that I may some day be able to thank Him that the child is a de Bletchingley. May He grant of His mercy that I never hear the name again."

Then Roger left me to seek some rest, for he needed it sadly, and I turned round on my settle and strove to sleep.

But that could not be; and right glad was I when Berthe came to the cottage and told me that the Mass was about to begin. I went forth with her to the little church, and there not far from the hearse, I saw a kneeling figure wrapped in cloak and hood—a lady, with a boy at her side. And but too well I knew who they were.

Later came a message entreating me to see, in the house of the good priest, one who had somewhat to say to me; and for a moment I felt that to die would be far easier than to go. But I be-thought me of the sweet saint whose earthly remains I was even then following to their last resting-place, and of the lessons she had given me in life, and I went.

I thank God that I did, though to face a dozen

fires such as that of yest'reen had been a thing less hard to do.

And when I entered the chamber where she awaited me, ere I could speak or so much as gather together my disordered thoughts, she came toward me with her boy in her hand and falling on her knees before me, poor Cicely Ibbetson, she—the fair wife of the proud Lord de Bletchingley—besought me to pardon the injuries which, so she said, had been inflicted by her and hers on me and mine.

I could scarce speak for weeping when I reflected how much holier she was than I. She would not rise until I had given her the kiss of peace, and then she entreated me to kiss the fair face of her boy. I ween that was a harder thing to do, for he kissed me with the lips of a de Bletchingley, and even then I thought bitterly that they would one day be perjured like the lips of his father; that a curse lay on them even now. It may be that she saw how I shrunk from him and yet God knoweth I meant not that it should be so.

She threw back her hood and begged me to listen to her for a moment and always to remember her in my prayers. Then she told me that the wrong done long ago had been visited heavily on the family of the wrong-doer. That of seven fair children only this one remained to her; and that she lived in a terrible fear that God would deprive her of him.

"Be as merciful in your judgments of us as you may, Mistress Cicely," she said, calling me by the old familiar name which none had used for so long; "and, believe me, they are not always to be most lamented whose lot it is to die young."

I know not what it was that drew my heart so strongly toward that gentle lady, but truly our friendship began then. She tarried not long nor said aught of her husband, whose name was not mentioned between us that day; but when we parted it was with the hope on both sides that we might some day meet again.

She went toward London with her servants and we continued on our sorrowful way. Four days later we reached the village of Twerton, and there found a crowd of the folk from Combe Eversleigh with many neighbors and friends; some new faces who had come for love of the Eversleighs; some old ones who had come for love of Mistress Audrey—friends whom I had not seen for well-nigh twenty years.

Like one in a dream I met and thanked them for their kindness and courtesy in coming thus to do honor to my dead; and early in the morning we set out on our way. By evening we came to Combe Eversleigh and straightway carried the coffin into the chapel in the old house. Alison was there and many others, but a mist was before my eyes, and in my heart, as I believe, for I scarce knew who spoke or what was said.

My good brother Roger took the ordering of all things, and ruled that for that night I must rest in his house with Alison; and in this wise, after an absence of twenty years, I came to Combe Eversleigh again.

CHAPTER XXI

AFRAID !

THE next morning a solemn Requiem was celebrated in the old church, and I saw Mistress Audrey laid beside Sir Marmaduke in the vault of the Eversleighs. Then followed a funeral banquet, from which I was fain to be excused, but of that Roger would not hear. The new owners of Combe Eversleigh, father and son, were present at the funeral, and afterwards Mistress Audrey's will was read aloud by the lawyer who had made it for her in London long ago, and had held it in his keeping since.

I scarce understood its purport as he read, but Roger told me afterwards that now I was rich, for my dear godmother had made me inheritor of all that she had, and many legacies had come to her in the last twenty years. Master Philip Eversleigh and his son were very civil, wherefore I could not altogether understand. But this, too, was made plain to me by Roger, who said it was because I also was truly an Eversleigh, and that the old race was now nearly at an end, for of it there remained only these two gentlemen and my poor self.

At last toward evening all the company, with the

heirs, had departed; and when stillness settled down upon the place I began to feel, what I could scarce realize before, that I was truly at Combe Eversleigh again. It was just as in the summers of my happy girlhood; for first Master Illsley, then Roger, after his death, had seen that no changes should be made save by Time, whose hand no man can stay.

I had to learn to know all Roger's children, except the second son, Cuthbert, whom we had left in France, and right proud was Alison to show me her eight fair sons and daughters, and to recount the praises of each when they were absent, as only mothers can. She entreated me to lodge in her house as I had done last night, but I longed once more to revisit the old house which for so many happy years had been my home, and still more to be for a while alone, which was impossible with her and the children, for in their kindness and sympathy they deemed that company must cheer me in my sorrow.

Herein they mistook, as things were. It was not that I loved them not; but they were not part of the old home. Moreover, the house was small for the numbers who abode there and I saw well that Alison must be incommoded if I occupied a chamber therein. So I said that if Joan, who had taken the place of Dame Gillian, could let me have my old room, I would gladly sleep there for the short time of my stay.

Hereat they exclaimed that I must not return to Brittany, but that henceforth my home must be with them. And this made my tears flow, for I was unused to affection save from my dear Mistress Audrey, whom on earth I might never see again.

Alison walked with me to the house and— But I can not write of it even now. Peradventure I have loved Combe Eversleigh too well.

Joan welcomed me kindly, lamenting that, among all the grand folk, she had not been able to speak to me before that day. And Alison left me, seeing that I was glad to be alone. I went into the chapel where lay on their tomb the effigies of Sir Miles and Marmaduke, which had been unfinished when I left them; and now they were no longer new. Ah, me, how strange it was! I knelt beside them weeping bitterly for the dear ones who had gone home so long before me, and also—should I shame to confess it?—for my own buried youth.

To me it seemed that I had been talking with Marmaduke but yesterday, and lo! he had been lying in the church in the village twenty years; his monument was darkening with time, and our blithe Muriel. . . .

Gone forever! Of all who had loved Combe Eversleigh there was none left but me. Hours passed as I half-knelt, half-crouched on the pavement, and Joan came to seek me at last. I went

with her into the hall, and strove to eat of the meal she had prepared, but in soul and body I was weary, and seeing this, she led me upstairs to the old chamber where I had so often slept with Muriel in the years that had passed. She would gladly have assisted me to disrobe, but I thanked her and sent her away, saying that I would sit a while in quiet ere I went to rest.

I sat on the broad window-seat, wondering if it could indeed be true that I was once more at home—though Combe Eversleigh could never be home again to me. A few short weeks and strangers would dwell here, strangers who neither knew nor cared for the old house as I did; ay, as I do still. And while these sad thoughts were in my mind and in my heart I was aware of a cold, strange feeling, of fear that crept over me, and knew that I was not alone. I dared not look away from the window through which I had been gazing in my sorrowful musing without seeing aught on which I gazed, but I heard, as certainly as now I hear the plashing of the waves, a footfall that after all those years I knew—the footfall of Muriel.

Nearer and nearer it came until it paused close beside me, and I could hear the rustle of her dress; methought I felt the folds touch my hand as it lay at my side and I shuddered and turned deathly cold. As if she were alive she knew it, and I heard her sigh just as she had sighed when we grieved

her in those last days before she died. Then I looked round.

She was there. Her hands were outstretched as if in pleading, her eyes were filled with unshed tears, and her lip was quivering as though she were wounded by my fear. Never, in the days when I had loved her most, though I know not when they were, for better than myself I had loved her always, had she looked more natural or more like herself, and yet I feared her with an awful fear. A cold sweat broke out upon my forehead, my hair appeared to creep as though it had a life apart from mine, my limbs seemed suddenly to turn to stone, and through it all my heart was breaking at its own unkindness. Would Muriel have treated me like this? My terror was stronger than my love, I could not speak to her. I could only stare into her face like one distraught and stupefied with fright.

So we remained for—who shall say how long? It seemed like ages to me. Then she wrung her hands with a motion of passionate sorrow, and slowly, almost despairingly, turned away. She crossed the chamber while I still sat there immovable; at the door she turned to me again and once more stretched out her hands with that gesture of entreaty, the most pathetic I had ever seen, and I could hear the low sobs that broke forth, like the sobbing of a child.

One moment she stood so, while I could neither

move nor speak; then she uttered a low, passionate cry and passed out of the chamber, leaving me alone. My terror left me then. I flew to the door and cried wildly:

"Oh Muriel, come back to me! Come back and tell me what I can do for thee! My darling, come to me again!"

It was in vain; she came not. And when I opened the door and looked out into the moonlit passage, there was nothing to be seen save the gray walls and the moonbeams that slanted across the floor. It was my turn to weep. How could I let our Muriel go so? What was her trouble, the trouble that in my selfish terror I had not even tried to learn? Was this my love for her? And what was the reason of her long unrest? Prayers had been offered with almsgiving; the Office of the Dead had been chanted; Masses had been said and sung for her for twenty years. What was it I had left undone? I would have died to call her back, but it was too late. She had gone from me and could hear me no more.

Long I waited and hoped against hope that Muriel would return. It was in vain. When the first gray streaks of dawn crept through the window I threw myself upon the bed, my own bed at Combe Eversleigh; and for the time I forgot the years that had fled. I sobbed myself to sleep, and when I woke and looked around me I thought I was a girl again, and half expected to hear Dame

Gillian calling from without and chiding me for not rising with the sun.

But the footstep in the corridor was Joan's, who came softly in to ask how I had slept. Then I noted how much she had changed. Her hair had grown gray like my own; her form was portly; her eyes were dim. Only her smile was just what it used to be, and her voice was kindly as of old. She went with me through the house, and bore patiently with the tears I shed in each well-remembered chamber; most of all in the great hall where we had been wont to sit in my young years, and wherein Marmaduke had died. I bethought me of the fair image of Our Lady which we had been used to honor in the wood, and the good soul brought me to a closet wherein she had set it, keeping fresh flowers and wax tapers before it every day. She always said the chaplet there, she told me, and the whole psalter on Sundays. I knelt to say my morning prayer, but was forced to give up praying for weeping, and then came suddenly into my mind the solemn promise Muriel had made to Marmaduke before he died. She had vowed never to know rest or pleasure upon earth; nay, never to enter heaven until his chapel was builded, even though she had to carry every stone with her own hands.

Could it be that God had held her by that vow? Was she, our bright, beautiful Muriel, on whom the wind of heaven had scarce been suffered to

blow in her young life on earth, doomed to wander alone and in anguish until her oath should have been kept? I had heard tales from Dame Gillian of such penance done by suffering souls. Could there be truth in such stories, and if so . . .

What was to be done? How was I to give her the succor that she had twice implored from me in vain?

Alison came for me ere that question was answered; and in truth to answer it was beyond my powers. She saw that I had been weeping, and drew me away to her own house in the firm belief, I am assured, that the bright smiles of her children and their gay voices must prove a sovereign remedy even for such grief as mine. In truth they did much for me, more, peradventure than aught else could have done.

But I longed to be alone with Roger—still more to speak with some wise and holy priest. I determined to tell my tale to some such at the first opportunity, yet half I feared lest he might mistrust my story, and tell me that I had been deceived into dreaming of Muriel and had taken mere fantasy for truth.

This I could by no means have brought myself to believe, even on the assurance of a learned divine. When I told Roger that day what I had seen he listened with a grave countenance but expressed no misbelief, nor hinted that it was all a dream, whereat I was greatly relieved. But he earnestly

besought me not to sleep alone in that chamber again. To please him I consented, and his second daughter, my namesake, Cicely, bore me company thenceforth. But Muriel troubled me no more.

Mine old friend Constance Harley, now Mistress Tom Neville, for she had married the cousin of pretty Bess Lynecourt many years ago, hearing of my stay at Eversleigh, sent a message to beg me to visit her at the house of her mother, whither she had come from her own home in Sussex to see that good lady, who was waxing in years and had become feeble now.

I willingly consented, for over and above mine old esteem for Constance and her mother, I could ill bear Combe Eversleigh, where the very trees seemed to whisper of them that had gone. With me, to her no small content, went my niece Cicely, whom I had learned to love more than her sisters, although I bore a true affection toward them all. Roger entreated me not to speak to any one of what I had seen that night in my chamber unless I should meet with some learned and saintly divine, for as yet I had seen no one to whom I could open my mind.

So I promised all that he desired and Cicely and I set forth to Harley Manor, which, scarcely less than Combe Eversleigh, was full of sad memories for me.

CHAPTER XXII

CONCLUSION

CICELY and I met warm welcome at Harley Manor, both from Mistress Harley, who was now stricken in years, and from her daughter Constance Neville; and right glad was I to see them again. The kindly English faces went home to my heart, and, moreover, these ladies had been dear to Mistress Audrey. They had known her well when we lived at Combe Eversleigh and were of those who are constant to their friends, which seems but few women are. And this not so much by their own fault it may be, as by hap of circumstance which comes between.

In their house I heard much of the failing health of the Queen's Grace, and of the fears entertained by many of the ancient faith that under her sister, the Princess Elizabeth, who must succeed upon her death, them of the true religion must needs suffer much, although few, if any, knew at the present time in which direction the Lady Elizabeth's belief was inclined. Perhaps they feared the more on that account, for wherefore should there be any mystery about the matter if she were a true Catholic and faithful to the Holy See? The coming years made the fact clear

enough, and completed the ruin of our wretched land, wherein more martyrs have been made in her day than by the very heathens themselves.

I heard, too, from Mistress Neville, much that concerned the sweet Lady de Bletchingley, whose acquaintance I had made in strange fashion at the village inn. Constance told me that her husband, the false lord whom I could scarce bear to hear mentioned even then, had accepted the King's supremacy under the eighth Henry and had conformed to the new religion under Edward his son, to the great grief of his lady, who would not be induced or persuaded to follow his example herein. After his apostasy one by one their children had died until only one remained, the fair boy whom it was my good hap to rescue from the flames. So far this child had been brought up in the true faith, since the reign of Queen Mary was Catholic, and even the Lord de Bletchingley had, for the past three years, attended Mass. But much Constance feared that under the Princess Elizabeth the new religion would be restored, and there was small doubt in the minds of them that knew him but de Bletchingley would change with the times.

"And that will be the death of his lady," said Constance; "for her life hath been a hard one, and she is well nigh heart-broken now. Little love had he for her ever, and wedded her only for her dower and her noble name. He needed both when life was before him, but he hath been cruel and a hard

master to her who gave them, more especially since her children died. Your fair cousin escaped much even by her death, Cicely; but some who knew him ever believed that what heart there was in Ralph de Bletchingley was buried in her early grave."

"Better she should lie in it than have wedded him," I cried and then burst into a passion of weeping, which greatly distressed Mistress Neville and made me sorely ashamed. Later she told me that since her own marriage, which by God's goodness was the happiest that could well be conceived—though she feared sometimes that Master Neville if urged by strong pressure might conform—she had known much of the de Bletchingleys, because her husband's house was in Sussex, at no great distance from theirs.

Master Neville, who had gone on business to London while his wife was with her mother, shortly returned and told us that scant hope was left that the Queen could live long. She was weighed down by illness and sorrow, and by fears of what must happen to the kingdom after her death. He took his wife home in two weeks after my coming, and earnestly she besought me to abide with the good lady her mother, since she herself might not, and for the present make Harley Manor my home.

This was what I had not so much as thought of, but there was good to be done among the poor and ailing round the Manor and the ancient lady was

herself in need of care. So I stayed. We heard in November of the death of the Queen's Grace, and how her sister Elizabeth shortly after was proclaimed.

Then came hard times for all good Christians and all them who had fain have served God according to their conscience in peace. The Lord de Bletchingley, as I heard from my good friend Constance, lost no time in conforming to the pleasure of the new queen, and that which he had trusted would be the making of his fortunes became, by God's providence, the means of his great misfortune and the undoing of his life. For hardly had the change been made known than his only son, the boy whom I had saved, was killed by drowning, and as none other was born to him the line of de Bletchingley came to an end.

Shortly afterwards he himself fell under the Queen's displeasure on a charge of conspiracy, whether rightfully or wrongfully I know not, and was thrown into a common prison, where he lingered long, despite of all the efforts made by his lady and her family to obtain his release. At last he was set free, but the proud spirit had become reckless under disgrace. He spent his patrimony and lived apart from his wife, to her great sorrow, for she would fain have won him to a better mind if she might. But this was not to be, and not long after, in the third year of Elizabeth, he was slain at a tavern—being struck in the back

by one whom he had offended even as he had struck down another in the days of his wicked youth.

My story is almost done; for I was to set forth the tale of Combe Eversleigh as I knew it, and not that of my own life. I stayed at Harley Manor, whither Roger and Alison and their children came to visit me sometimes, until the death of Mistress Harley, which happened when I had abode there three years. In that time I had become well known to the Lady de Bletchingley, whose trouble and sorrow were greater than those of any one whom I have ever known.

Strangers were dwelling then at Combe Eversleigh, and, moreover, they had conformed to the new religion and the Holy Mass was no longer celebrated in the church wherein it had been offered for close upon three hundred years.

And in those three years I had not forgotten Muriel. A learned and holy man to whom I told my trouble counselled me to build, if it were possible so to do, the chapel to which she had bound herself by oath, in hope thereby of obtaining rest for her soul; and Roger strove to purchase for me the piece of ground in the wood whereon we had raised our shrine to Our Lady in our young days.

But it might not be. The new race of Eversleighs were civil in all things to Roger, whom they valued highly for his faithful service, and to me as

a kinswoman and as Mistress Audrey's heir. But they would not hear of selling land for a chapel to be built, more especially when they learned that it was to be a chapel of Our Lady, wherein Mass should be offered daily for the repose of the souls of Sir Miles and his son. To do so would soon be treason, they said.

And so it proved in no long period of time. Then I deemed it would be better to return to Brittany, where I might serve God as I knew He would be served and get Masses said for my dead, since I could help them in no other way.

By this time the false Lord de Bletchingley was dead, and his widow, having no other friend but me, agreed to go with me to Kerugal, where together we might serve God and His poor, and prepare for our own end. Later on she was called by matters connected with her own family to the French court, whither I accompanied her and there we abode perforce, for a short time.

When matters in England grew so bad for them of the faith that life was no longer bearable, Roger made over his land to Master Neville, who had conformed, as his wife feared he might, and came to me with his family; and we, with the Lady de Bletchingley, abode at the chateau for some time.

After her death, which was saintly as her life had been, and when Roger's children and grandchildren were so numerous as to fill the old house,

I removed with my niece Cicely, his eldest daughter, to this cottage by the sea, wherein I have dwelt ever since.

Roger and Alison have both gone before me to God, and I am very aged, so that my time now can not be long. I trust in God's mercy, and through the prayers of the saints whom I have known, to meet with a favorable judgment, and to obtain a speedy deliverance from the pains of purgatory which I have deserved by mine own shortcomings and sins.

Roger's son Cuthbert, after finishing his studies, became a priest, and then nothing would serve him but to return to our unhappy country, where he was thrown into prison for hearing the confessions of such as were in need, and there, of hard treatment, he died. Surely he must pray for us now. And my grand-nephew, another Roger, hath since followed in his uncle's steps and he, too, hath suffered much for the faith. Where he is at this present I know not, but God's angels have him in charge.

And for mine own self I have but one wish after mine own salvation and that of them whom I love. It is that God, in His infinite mercy, may vouchsafe to bring back the faith to my unhappy country, and most of all to Combe Eversleigh. He knows that had it been permitted me I would have given all I had, and labored with my own hands had such been His will, to build the chapel which

Marmaduke desired and Muriel swore so solemnly to raise.

But that was not to be. Roger obtained for me the fair image of the ever blessed Mother of God and brought it with him to Brittany, and it stands now with all honor in our village church, where the fisher-folk come to say their prayers and firmly believe, what I doubt not to be true, that any petition is granted which is made before that shrine.

And now I have fulfilled my promise and know of naught more to be said. I trust that my poor efforts to comply with their desire will atone for all defects (and I know them to be many) which may appear in this which I have writ. And I pray with all my heart that the good God may open the eyes and inflame the wills of all them who bear the name of Eversleigh so that in His good time they may be brought to the knowledge and practice of the faith.

* * * * *

POSTSCRIPTUM

WHEN I laid down my pen I deemed that I had written the last word in the history of them whom I knew and loved at Combe Eversleigh and that even as I said then, there was naught more to be writ. But lo, since then a thing hath happened so wonderful, and so far beyond all hope and expectation, that I must needs record it here.

The messenger whom I looked for to bear my

poor papers to them at Combe Eversleigh, came indeed, though not as soon as he was expected; but he brought the unlooked-for tidings of the sudden deaths of the last of the race who bore the name. And now by a wonderful dispensation I, poor Cicely Ibbetson, so long a dependant on the bounty of that house, am the last heir of Combe Eversleigh. Too old and feeble am I to return to my own land—and herein I thank my God who hath given me one sacrifice to make for His sake in mine old age. But when the harshness of persecution hath ceased, as in His time it must, I trust that the children of Roger will return and take possession of that which is theirs.

And I pray of them, and in my last will and testament (made yesterday lest peradventure my time should be shorter than we looked for), I do entreat and command them, that to whomsoever the lands and house of Combe Eversleigh shall fall on my decease, he will without fail or demur take the old and honored name of Eversleigh, and transmit the same to them that shall come after him so that it may not die out in the land.

And moreover I have charged, and do charge him, whomsoever he may be, for the sake of his own immortal soul, and for mine, to build upon the spot which in my testament is described, a chapel of Our Lady wherein Mass shall be said for the souls of Miles Eversleigh, and for that of Marmaduke his son; and for the soul of Muriel

Eversleigh, and Mistress Audrey Eversleigh and for mine.

And as my heir shall fulfill this my last will and command, may God's blessing rest on him and his.

KERUGAL, A.D., 1603.

**Papers of said Father Cuthbert Ibbetson after his
blessed death in the prison at Walsbeach.**

**LETTER OF CICELY IBBETSON'S BROTHER ROGER TO
HIS SON CUTHBERT**

AND now, my son, it behooveth me to enlighten you on a matter which hath lain heavily on the hearts of some of us; and of which I deem it better to write in a foreign tongue, since the matter is private, and such as for many reasons should not be blazoned abroad.

And as ghostly counsel is hard to come by in these days with us, I pray you to talk over this business in private with one learned and wise in spiritual matters, such as you must meet with often in the place where you are; and so, having learned what shall be best for us to do in this strait, let me know the same as speedily as shall comport with your convenience, both for my own help and comfort and for the relief of that poor wandering soul.

You have not, I ween, forgotten the name of my sister, Cicely Ibbetson, who, after spending many years of her life at Combe Eversleigh in the service of Mistress Audrey Eversleigh, her godmother, and of Mistress Muriel Eversleigh, Mistress Audrey's niece, did, after the death of said Mistress Muriel, retire across seas into Brittany with said Mistress Audrey, to escape the miseries of the times here in England, and to practice her religion in peace.

There they abode with certain servants who had traveled with them from Combe Eversleigh; only Dame Gillian, who had been housekeeper at Eversleigh in the old days, did return after a time with Joan Parkin, Mistress Muriel's maid, because neither of these two could ever learn to speak a foreign tongue.

And Master Illsley being at that time tenant at the manor, was right glad to welcome the women back to their old places, because they were faithful servants, and because they knew well all the ways of the house. And for love of Mistress Muriel and Cicely, Dame Gillian, having such choice permitted her, willed to sleep in that chamber which in years past had been theirs, although it was somewhat distant from that wherein slept the other women, and from those of Master Illsley and the men servitors still farther removed.

Now all this must, methinks, dwell in your memory, my son, since you were with us at home at the time of Dame Gillian's return; and must have seen her oftentimes when she came, as was her custom, to visit your good mother at the Grange.

But as you were only a child, albeit even then discreet beyond what might be looked for at your years, that which I am about to write came not to your knowledge then.

It was, perhaps, a week or more after Dame Gillian's coming from Brittany that I went to the Manor to speak on a matter of business with Mas-

ter Illsley, and as I left that good gentleman, Joan came to me, and prayed me to step into the still-room, where Dame Gillian was fain to speak with me as speedily as might be. So I went to the Dame forthwith, and found her pale and with a look of terror on her face such as I minded not to have seen with her before; and her eyes were red as with weeping, which seemed to me strange for a woman of her years.

But she had good cause for her terror, ay, and for grief also, I fear me.

Then she told me that she was in much distress of mind, not knowing to whom she could confide the trouble that had befallen her, nor what it were well to do in the strange hap that had occurred; and she prayed me to help with my counsel, if indeed I could see any way to do so after hearing her tale.

It appeared that she had been minded to sleep in that chamber which had once been Mistress Muriel's, but as it had been disused all the time of her absence, would first give it such a cleaning as good housewives like Dame Gillian see to be needful wherever they go; and then had fires to be lighted, and I know not what, so that she slept not in that chamber until the night before this day whereon we were speaking together. The good Dame was weary when she went to bed, both by reason of much labor, and for heaviness of heart, and for some hours slept soundly enough.

But presently she was wakened, in a strange fright, by a sound of much sobbing, and thinking that Joan had come to her weeping for them whom she had left behind in Brittany, or mayhap for the altered fortunes of the house, Dame Gillian cried aloud :

“Who is there? Joan, what aileth thee?”

But no answer was returned, and the sobbing continued; whereat Dame Gillian sat up, and with her bodily eyes saw standing in the broad moonlight by her bedside, Muriel Eversleigh, as she had seen and known her in the flesh.

The maiden had grown no older in the years since she died, and she wore a dress of a wondrous texture, that Sir Marmaduke had brought her from London, the same in which we had thought to see her wedded—and lo! it had served her for a shroud instead. Dame Gillian said that the threads of gold glittered in the moonbeams, and the diamonds in her hair shone like stars; and all the while she wrung her hands and sobbed as one in utmost extremity, and her weeping was like the anguish of a child.

For a while Dame Gillian gazed like one amazed and astounded, unable to utter a word, from the strangeness and terror of the sight. But when perhaps she had grown familiar with gazing, and knew that indeed it was none other than Muriel who stood there, she gathered heart for very pity, and cried :

"In the name of God, Mistress Muriel, what aileth thee? Is there aught that I can do to ease thy pain?"

And for all answer Muriel only wept and wrung her hands, until Dame Gillian spoke again, conjuring her for the love of Jesus crucified to be of better cheer, and tell her old nurse if aught might be done by her or any that might give her rest! And then did the maiden stretch out her hands in piteous entreaty and cry aloud:

"Come out into the wood with me, Dame Gillian! I am so cold and weary. And it is a bitter thing to be alone!"

And so wailing, Muriel turned away, and passed out through the door, and so downstairs.

But Dame Gillian stirred not—she knoweth not even if she had the power to stir. But she heard sounds of sobbing and the rustle of a silken robe upon the stairs; and then, she averreth, her senses left her, and she knew nothing more until the sunbeams streamed in upon her and it was broad day.

Now of this tale, at the time, I, sooth to say, thought but little, save that Dame Gillian had pondered much of Muriel when she lay down in the maiden's chamber, and that a dream of her old mistress had come to her from the depths of a sore heart.

But this I said not to the good woman, who could in no wise have looked upon the thing in that

light; for I have noted that women have ever more faith in their own fancies than we of the sterner sort sometimes place in proven fact. So I e'en comforted Dame Gillian as best I could, counseled her to choose another chamber, and to speak to none other of the vision—if such indeed it were—that she had seen, lest the tale be noised abroad and men avert the old house to be haunted by a spirit, than which a more hurtful thing could scarce be said.

Dame Gillian followed my counsel and, to the best of my belief, was troubled no more—save indeed by remorse of spirits, inasmuch as she often declared to me that she could not rest at night for thinking that sweet Muriel was in sore distress, and she, Dame Gillian, lacked the strength of heart to help her if she could. Never again did she set foot in that chamber until the hour wherein she died; nor did any ever spend the night there again, until, after the death of Mistress Audrey in Brittany, when your aunt, my good sister, Cicely, came over to see her old friend and mistress laid among her kin; and then no chamber would serve her but that.

Now I know well that Gillian had breathed in no mortal ear save mine own, and, it may be, that of the priest whom by the mercy of God we were enabled to bring to her before she died, the tale of what she deemed that she had seen and heard that night. Your Aunt Cicely could not have heard the

story; and Joan, who still dwelt at Eversleigh, knew nought of it.

Yet was my poor Cicely terrified well-nigh out of her senses by a vision of Muriel, who wept and wailed and wrung her hands beside her bed. I told not to Cicely what I had learned from Dame Gillian, but only made my wife, your good mother, persuade her to sleep in that chamber no more. It was long in my mind to pray some holy priest to abide there, and see if so be he might speak to that unquiet spirit, and perchance, by his good prayers, and the offering of the Holy Sacrifice, win for it eternal rest.

But the heirs came to dwell at Eversleigh, and both father and son, as thou knowest, had conformed. If a priest were to enter that house as things are, it must be at certain peril of his life; and to that will I bring no man willingly, much less a holy priest of God.

But now thou hast come to man's estate, my son, and hast studied diligently and learned much, I doubt not; and therefore hath it seemed good to me to tell thee this story, that at least thou mayst pray for that poor soul. And all the more is this needful at this present, for that of late strange rumors have been afloat in the village of sights seen at midnight, and of weeping and wailing heard in Eversleigh woods; so that even poachers, who have never the fear of men before their eyes, will no longer venture there after nightfall, to the

great saving of the hares and partridges if no other good be attained.

In the forepart of this letter I have told thee of thy good mother and the rest of our family whatever may interest thee to know ; and so I commend thee to God's holy keeping and myself to thy good prayers.

ROGER IBBETSON.

NOTE.—*In the Latin tongue and in the handwriting of Father Cuthbert Ibbetson, to the letter of Roger Ibbetson, anent the apparition of Mistress Muriel Eversleigh after her death to Dame Gillian Osbrook, sometime housekeeper at Eversleigh.*

From the day whereon this letter from mine honored father was delivered to me then finishing the course of my studies at the college of Rheims, I ceased not diligently to pray for the soul of that poor Muriel ; and after that I was ordained priest I offered up for the same end the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass many times, and induced others of my friends who were priests to do the same. And I had it well in mind to go, if it should be possible, to Combe Eversleigh, and if I might not abide in the Manor House, since they who dwell therein and own the place have conformed, then would I go privily to the woods, and watch there in the hope of doing some good to the soul of one whose kin for many years were good to friends of mine. But after my landing in England I was compelled by

obedience to them who had a right to command to spend my time in divers places at some distance from Eversleigh, until at last, by permission of God, I was taken by the officers of the Queen's Majesty, and shut up in this prison of Wisbeach, whence I do never expect to go forth alive. But I do pray and beseech any who bear the names of Eversleigh or Ibbetson into whose hands these papers may at any time fall, to do what it hath not been the will of God that I should do. And even as they shall show mercy to that suffering soul, may the Lord of all show mercy unto them.

CUTHBERT IBBETSON, PRIEST; *In the Prison at Wisbeach*

Copy of paper writ by Marmaduke Ibbetson of the Grange at Combe Eversleigh, and elder brother to Cuthbert Ibbetson, priest (writer of the above note), setting forth his reasons for permitting his son Roger Ibbetson to go over seas and study theology at the college at Rheims with intent to be ordained priest; as by God's grace he afterwards was.

It hath given matter for astonishment to many that I, having but two sons, should have permitted one of them, and he the elder, to cross the seas with intent to become a priest at this time, when

even the aiding and abetting of the same is treason, and like to bring a man to a bitter and untimely end were it found out. Now to me it seemeth reason enough for a Christian man to let his son be made priest that God should have given him a call thereto; and for the danger that goeth with this calling, I see not that it be more than attacheth to soldier or sailor, if as much. And may God forbid that I should strive to prevent child of mine, whether daughter or son, from doing or suffering the utmost He may see fit to demand.

But in this case there chanceth to be joined with the foregoing a motive so strange and yet so powerful withal, that I have thought it well to write it down. And let all such as read this who bear my name beware how they doubt any of the words that shall be here written; for I, Marmaduke Ibbetson, was eye-witness to the facts herein set down.

Now for the understanding of this most strange story, I must needs go backward on the course of years, and relate how that my father, Roger Ibbetson, having long served the Eversleighs as land-steward, in fair weather and foul, did at last, when his children came to be many in number, and that he found in his own country no means of teaching them letters without peril to their faith, and I, his eldest son, understanding the business of the estate well enough, young as I was, did resolve to cross over seas with his other children, leaving me to fill his place as best I might at the Grange.

Sir Philip Eversleigh was willing enough to agree to this plan, for while he honored my father, and was ever his friend, as in truth no man ever deserved friends more than he, who next after the service of his God had always put that to the house of Eversleigh, still he lived in constant fear of what suspicion my father's known adhesion to the ancient religion might bring upon himself and his friends.

So all things being made ready, and permission procured from the Queen's Grace, which was easily done through the influence of Philip Eversleigh with my Lord Walsingham, my father carried his family to Brittany, where he dwelt, until his death, with his sister Cicely Ibbetson, whom we called our French aunt, in a house which had once been my mother's, but was purchased from her by Mistress Audrey Eversleigh in the first days of the troubles in England, now many years ago.

And I, being left thus alone, as it were, did no long time after his departure unite myself in marriage, with his will and consent, to a fair and discreet maiden of the ancient faith, whose dower was less than her worth, but her family somewhat better than mine own. In due time we were blessed with a family of two fair sons and three daughters, of whom Roger, named after mine own good father, came first.

Now in good truth I think not that we, his mother and I, were over-indulgent with our first-

born; nor that we forgot, his mother in especial, that we must answer for his soul to God. Yet did he show, as he grew up, more wilfulness of mind and less fear of wholesome discipline, and was wilder and more intractable withal than his young brother or any of the maids.

Not that our boy was rebellious to his parents ever, or guilty of dishonesty in word or deed; but in boyhood he was never still or quiet, showed but little love for his books, and much for rambling in the woods round Eversleigh and for all outdoor sports and play.

And yet, albeit I rated him soundly for his idleness, and spared not the rod when it was needful to teach the boy the error of his ways, I fear me that the sight of his bright face and the sound of his glad shout on the hillside brought back the memory of my own young days, and my heart warmed to his faults more readily than to the virtues of his brother, than whom a steadier or more godly youth for his age was never seen.

For if Roger was quick at climbing the trees at Eversleigh, and played truant when the hounds were out, or in summer when the trout were quick to rise, he came more promptly for his punishment when the fault was done than Lance showed in getting up from the ingleside where he sat over his books at sound of his mother's voice or mine. Yet was Lance, too, ever an obedient son, and is now, I thank God for all His mercies, the comfort and

glory of mine age; but in those days he was slower in all things, it seemed to me even in love, than his brother, always excepting his books. And his aptness for learning gave me little comfort, since to become a priest was all one with exile or martyrdom, and assuredly we of the old faith had small cause to love the English law. Of the two it were better to be the slain than the slayer and far rather had I laid son of mine in a bloody and untimely grave for conscience' sake, than see him sit in judgment on a priest of God.

But Lance was to be neither lawyer nor priest. The lot fell to him for whom I never suspicioned it—but who can forecast the judgment of God? During those years wherein I minded the lands of Combe Eversleigh as if they were mine own, and my father abode across the seas, he found means to journey to Eversleigh on three divers occasions, two whereof were made openly and one in secret; but their purpose (wherein he failed always) was at each time the same; *viz.*, the purchasing, if it might be done, of a certain plot of ground in the wood near the Manor on the possession whereof mine Aunt Cicely, for what reason at that time I knew not, had set her heart. But Sir Philip Eversleigh could never be persuaded to give up that piece of land, and small wonder was it that he should hold to his refusal, seeing that the plot was in the very midst of the lands that pertained to him, and, moreover, so nigh unto the house.

It was while my father tarried with us at the Grange at the last time of his coming, that he told me of strange sights that had been seen at the Manor, to his own certain knowledge by Mistress Audrey's serving-woman, Dame Gillian, and later by mine Aunt Cicely herself.

But he charged me on no account to speak of the thing to any, not even to my wife; for, he said the women be aye fearful, and little likely to keep secret such a tale. Whereas, if it were bruited abroad, it would discredit the Manor, which might come in time to be shunned for haunted, as were already more than one house that we knew.

Now I placed as little credence in such tales as any man, and agreed right willingly to hold my peace. My father strove in vain, and, as I think, against his better judgment, to prevail upon Sir Philip for the sale of the ground, and no long time afterwards, when my father was again in Brittany that gentleman died; whereupon his son Sir Godfrey removed to London, and the Manor House was, for a long while, shut up, or I should rather say left with none to dwell therein save Giles Hodge and his wife Marjorie, two old servitors, of whom one was wholly deaf and the other more than half blind, and old Joan who prayed that for the sake of ancient memories she might remain there to die.

And now it behooved to keep a sharp eye on the poachers and stealers of wood who waxed bold

when the family was removed from the Manor, deeming, peradventure, that now none would have care of the game. Than which no greater mistake could be made; for Sir Godfrey's expenditure was greater in London than ever it had been or could be at Eversleigh, and I had to raise money in what manner I might, so always that the manner were an honest one whereby no harm was done to the poor.

For the rest the charge of the Manor was in itself no hard thing; and we were enabled, upon occasion, to give shelter in its wide chambers to the suffering confessors of the faith who were hunted down by worse than poachers in that day. And more than once was the Holy Mass offered in a secret corner, whereat the tenants who still clung to the old religion assisted with much comfort to their souls.

Soon after Sir Godfrey left he wrote me that my father and my Aunt Cicely had again striven by letter to induce him to sell to them that part of Eversleigh wood called the Tangle (because in course of years it had become so overgrown with bracken and underwood that not even boys looking for bird's-nests could win through) and that he had again, and with insistence, refused. And in jest he added that he deemed those two must, in years past, have buried some treasure under the moss in the Tangle or they never could be so set upon such an unreasonable a thing as having those acres for their own—in his despite, if better might not be.

Now I myself felt half angered at mine aunt's persistence—for I knew right well that my father acted in this matter only for her. And it seemed to me scarce mannerly to drive a gentleman like Sir Godfrey, or indeed any one for that matter, when his will had been so often and plainly declared.

When I went into the keeping-room where my wife sat at her spinning I read aloud to her some portion of this letter, and notably Sir Godfrey's jest. But the good soul smiled not at the notion of the hidden treasure, only looked graver than was her wont and repeated after me:

"The 'Tangle, Marmaduke, sayest thou? But that place is said to be the haunt of an evil spirit. I had it in my mind since yesterday to speak with thee anent the tales afloat about that wood. The boys were talking of it when they thought themselves alone, and I heard Roger aver that he and Dickon Fadgett meant to watch there at midnight, so that with their eyes they might once behold a ghost. I would thou couldst put an end to his friendship for Dickon. Our Roger groweth wilder every day, and sure I am that rough lad is to blame for it."

Now I could never bring myself to believe that Dick Fadgett was a leader to our Roger, who was by some years older than he, and ready enough for any mischief on his own account. Nor had I any fear of evil spirits saving such as dwell in the bod-

ies of poachers and game-stealers, whom I had no mind that those boys should meet at midnight alone. And that spot was, than all others, less likely to be troubled by unearthly visitants, for there in the old times had Mistress Muriel and my Aunt Cicely and Marmaduke Eversleigh been wont to meet together, and pray before a fair image of Our Lady which Marmaduke had brought from beyond seas for the maidens, and had set up there in the wood.

That Muriel, who had broken the heart of her cousin and, in what manner I knew not, caused him at last to be most foully slain, as the tale went, though this my father and my Aunt Cicely ever denied, that she, I say, should haunt her old chamber in the Manor House, I might perchance bring myself to believe. But the woods of Eversleigh! I had dwelt there, man and boy, for over forty years, and had seen nought worse than myself or, mayhap, a stray poacher, in all that time. The thing was altogether past belief. But remembering the days of my own youth which had been much like my Roger's, I knew that if the boy had made a plan to watch the Tangle he must needs carry out the same, and sooth to say, I felt not altogether displeased that son of mine should be afeared of nothing save sin.

All things duly considered, therefore, I determined, but without telling his mother, to watch Roger that evening, and should he leave the house

privily, as my wife deemed for certain he would, then would I follow and propose myself to hold him company with Dick Fadgett in whatever business he might have in hand.

So bidding my wife to be of good cheer, for I would take heed that no harm should come to the boy, I left her; and for the rest of that day I pondered in my mind how I should best put a stop to the gossip about ghosts and goblins which had been set afloat among the lads, and prevent the same from getting to the ears of their mothers, if so be indeed it were not already too late; for verily, in places like Eversleigh, a tale is like the plant we do call Lady Smock, which can rarely be gotten rid of if once it be allowed to take root.

I said no word to Roger all that day of his intent or of mine, but when all had gone to rest that night, at about nine of the clock, I did steal quietly from my chamber and slipping out did seat myself on the porch by the front door, judging that Roger would come by that way, as being farthest from the sleeping-chambers; and there I waited in the darkness of the summer evening for the greater part of an hour, having close at hand a firearm which I always kept loaded in the house, lest thieves might one day find us unprepared.

And in the pocket of my vest some blessed beads I carried, and an Agnus Dei, besides holy water, whereof we kept store in an usquebaugh flask to deceive the pursuivants should they ever visit the

Grange. The gun I had intent to carry that night for any living man who should think well to molest us; the beads and holy water as a protection against enemies of another sort.

Yet, truth to tell, I had no real thought of encountering such, for I had small faith at that time in any visitors from the other world coming in my way; though I doubted not but such might be seen at times by men more saintly, or mayhap, greater sinners than I.

So I sat by the porch in our garden, and was thinking that the lads must have chosen some other night for their venture, when I heard the soft fall of naked feet upon the stair within; the door was opened right stealthily, and Roger stepped into the porch. He stood a moment to put on his shoes, and as the moon had arisen shortly before, I could see the boy's face. Pale it was, but firm and set withal, as though in stern determination to carry through what he had in his mind.

I walked quietly over the green sward to the gate, and leaned on the low wall under the shadow of a wytch-elm that grew there, so that he neither heard nor saw me until he stood beside me and his hand was on the gate. Then he started and stepped back a pace, and said, "Father!" wondering doubtless what strange hap had brought me there.

Then I, softly: "What brings thee from thy bed at this hour, Roger, without leave from thy mother or me?"

The boy dropped his eyes to the ground, as in thought for a moment, then looked up to my face and made answer in a voice that shook a little, with the new surprise of seeing me when he so little expected it.

"They say that a troubled spirit walks at night in the manor woods, father; and we made a plan to watch for it this evening, Dick Fadgett and I."

"And were ye not afeard of what such spirit might do to ye?" I said sternly. "Coming out to wander in the night-time without leave? Is lack of obedience good preparation for such quest, think you? For well I ween Dick Fadgett's mother knoweth nought of this mad freak."

"I think not that Dick hath been forbidden to walk abroad in the night-time, and, under correction, my father," said Roger, "neither have I. So we thought not of committing any sin. And oh, forbid me not to go, I beseech thee. There is no danger, and the way is not far."

"And who is this goblin that walks in Eversleigh woods?" I said, making light of it. "Truly, Roger, thy ghost must be a friendly one to me and the keepers. He will serve better than any or all of us to drive poachers away—unless indeed he hath himself a taste for slaying deer. Who is he, I pray thee?"

The boy hung his head abashed for a moment, for nought toucheth a young soul—nor an old one either for that matter—like ridicule from one re-

spected or beloved. But seeing that I waited for an answer he presently said :

"They tell a tale at the Forge that old Sir Miles haunteth the Tangle, and striveth ever to force a way through the bracken and brushwood, moaning for prayers."

"And what reason, thinkest thou, foolish boy, Sir Miles can have for wandering in the woods where none can hear or aid, rather than in the Manor where there be lodgers sometimes——"

"'Tis said that Sir Miles was a wicked man," faltered Roger; "and that he pulled down a fair chapel of Our Lady that once stood in the wood. And for that—for that——"

"And for that he must dree his penance at midnight as, in old wives' tales, bad spirits do! But I tell thee, Roger, that no chapel ever stood in the wood at Combe Eversleigh; therefore is it beyond all question that Sir Miles could have pulled none down. And thou knowest, my son, that I was born at the Grange, and that my father lived there before me during many years. All that concerned the family he knew, and was well acquaint with Sir Miles. The old knight may have sinned, as we all do, but if so, he repented and died a holy death. It is little likely thou shouldst meet him, Roger; but by all I have heard of him even if thou shouldst cross his path uncalled for, thou wilt have no wish to linger with him long, unless men change much from their old ways in the next world."

"And may I not go, father?"

"Nay, I said not I would hinder thee from going; but only that I have small faith in thy meeting Sir Miles. Where doth Dick Fadgett await thee?"

Knowing me well Roger saw that there was hope for him, and he looked up eagerly.

"He promised to meet me by our gate at ten of the clock," he said; "mayhap his mother hath prevented him, even as——"

"Even as I have not prevented thee, Roger. It is past ten now, my boy. Mayhap Dick hath taken wiser thought since the night closed, and found it not well to leave his bed."

"May I wait for him a little longer?" Thereto I agreed. We stood leaning on the wall together, me and my boy, and I noted that by degrees he crept closer until his hand rested on my arm—not for fear or apprehension but from pure content at my presence there, and the knowledge that I would let him have his way. And so I found my arm presently round his shoulder, and with no word passing between us we stood; and I verily believe that our souls held communion together as they had never done before; and if I loved not the boy better from that time forth, a thing that was scarce possible perhaps, certes we had so clear an understanding as nothing since could ever lessen, much less destroy.

Half an hour passed thus—a short half-hour to

me—and as Dick Fadgett came not, Roger was fain to confess that his friend had played him false unless some mischance had befallen; and I strove to tell the boy in mocking-wise, that I feared me the ghost would serve him in like fashion, and that there would be none save his unlooked for father to witness how he kept his tryst.

But the jest died upon my lip. For some reason that I know not a strange sensation, such as had never come to me before, crept about my heart, and so in silence, I keeping my arm round Roger's shoulders still, we turned from the gate and went our way. The path from the Grange lay through the open space before the Manor, some half-mile below the house, and thence through the wood to the Tangle. We wandered slowly through the clear moonlight, and once or twice I felt a tugging at my heartstrings, and wondered whether I had done rightly in bringing Roger on such a quest—and then I found that, for what reason I know not, I had clean forgotten my gun.

It was still leaning against the wall in our garden, and I was glad when I knew it, for it seemed to me then that such a weapon was the last that would be needed that night. And then—with a thought of his mother—I bade Roger say his prayers, and we told our beads together as we entered the dark wood.

The great clock in the church-tower at Combe Eversleigh struck eleven just as the last *Ave* was

finished, and we stood for a space listening to the dull sounds, as one by one they struck upon the stillness of the night. When the last stroke was ended we said the *Salve Regina*, and then Roger wondered what his mother would think of my absence from home. I satisfied him that she would not be anxious on my score, for I had told her I should be away until morning, a thing that sometimes occurred; and from that we fell to talking of matters that had never come up between us till now, and I learned more of my son's soul in that hour of midnight stillness in the woods than his fifteen years of busy boyish life, spent under mine own eyes, had taught me.

For whether it was the mystic quiet of the moonlight, and the knowledge that all about us slept, or the still noises of the night—the rustling of the trees, the plashing of the waterfall, and the stirring and twitter of the restless birds; sounds that by day had passed unnoted but smote upon our ears with strange persistence now; or whether my unwonted following of his fancy and bearing him company when his friend had failed and he had looked for nought from me but chiding, I can not say. Mayhap it was an effect of the merciful kindness of the God who gave him, and to whom we are, perchance, in our human childishness, somewhat like what Roger was to me.

But for whatever cause, my boy spoke freely, pouring out to me, his father, the inmost feelings

of his heart. Right high and noble were his thoughts, thank God, and as we talked together I felt my own soul stirred within me. Mine own bright hopes and young imaginings came back to me, and I clean forgot the purpose that had brought him—and me for his sake—into the wood. So, belike, had he, for as we paced slowly up and down in the broken moonlight, whereof but little could pierce through the thickness of the trees above our heads, Roger stopped and laid his hand upon mine arm.

“There is some one near us, father,” he said, in a whisper, but entirely void of fear; “some child or maiden is sobbing yonder—farther down the path.”

We stood and listened for a moment.

The boy spoke sooth. So near as to seem close beside us came the sound of weeping; as Roger said truly, it was like the sobbing of a weary, frightened child, and by far too real and lifelike to bring thought of any visitor from the other world into our minds. Close behind us it sounded, on the very path that we had come.

With my arm still round my boy, I turned to see what help I might render, and then—we saw the secret of the wood of Eversleigh, and I knew why mine Aunt Cicely would fain have had it for her own.

Toiling up the rugged way came a maiden, the loveliest I had ever looked upon in spite of her ex-

ceeding woe. Even now methinks that I can see her as she stood before mine eyes that night. She wore a wondrous robe that seemed woven of moonlight; hair of raven blackness all dank and heavy with the summer dews hung over it far below her waist. Gems glittered among her tresses, but they were not brighter than her eyes that sparkled like black stars, despite the tears that should have dimmed them, and that fell in showers upon the glorious robe.

Strange sight was this to meet at midnight in a wood; but, stranger still, the lady bore in her small hands, that seemed scarce strong enough to lift aught heavier than her own slight fan, a large, rough, moss-green stone, whereon, as she bore it before her, with no regard to the glory of her robe, the tears lay shining like to sparks of living fire.

And all around and about her was a lambent light, that was not like sunlight or moonlight, or aught else made by the good God to gladden and make bright the earth; but rather such as is shed by many lamps or torches when they show through rain.

All this I saw in one instant and straightway I knew that this was Muriel, condemned to do her penance mostlike, in the place where she had sinned. She turned from the path and strove to pass into the brush that grew so thickly in that spot, and as she stepped upon the bed of moss that lay beside the pathway, that stone she bore per-

mitted her not even to strive to put aside with her hand the long brambles that flew back upon her, and struck her cruelly upon her eyes and face. Now I, gazing in awestruck wonder and pity, and knowing, or deeming that I knew, that a spirit could take no ill from the stones or briers of earth, gave no thought to fending her from either. Only, standing motionless, I prayed as best I might in my heart for that poor soul.

Not so my Roger. Leaving the shelter of my arm he sprang toward the maiden, and throwing before her the hand around whose wrist the beads of the blessed Mary were still wound, with the other he forced back the stinging branches and so made a way wherein she might pass if she would.

And lo, a marvel! As the boy threw his hand forward the cross that hung on his rosary touched the stone the maiden carried, and straightway it fell at her feet, and she passed on. Whereat Roger stood still, and the poor spirit also, howbeit she still wept and wrung her hands, now that they were free. My boy's face looked to me even as the face of an angel as he kneeled and said:

"Lady, I pray thee, in the name of the most high God, to tell me wherein I may serve or aid thee. If what thou wouldst be in the power of one so little worth as I it shall be done."

At this I was fain to hurry forward and forbid the boy to bind himself, for how knew I whether that spirit were from God or no?

But I had no power to move, and was forced to stand there while a voice more mournful than aught I ever heard—and such as, in good truth, I trust well I may never hear on earth again—replied :

“I am Muriel Eversleigh, who am doomed by almighty Justice to labor here in punishment for the making—and breaking—of a most rash vow. Comfort thou mayst win for me by prayers and Masses, but never can I enter heaven, or enjoy the blissful vision of my God, until a chapel shall be builded here in honor of Our Lady, wherein Masses may be offered for them of my kin. Alas, woe is me !”

The misery of that wail, and the sound of it, rings still in my ears as I write this; and whenever I lie awake at midnight it is present with me almost as when then I heard it first.

I longed again to go forward, but power to move was denied me, whereat I was well-nigh angry as I stood helpless and still. Roger spoke again :

“Is there nought we can do to save thee from this midnight labor? May none bear these cruel stones save thou ?”

“I vowed to raise a chapel here, though I should carry the stones with mine own hands, and never enter heaven till it was built,” wailed the maiden; “and here every night must I labor as thou seest, save only after a day whereon the holy Mass hath been offered for my suffering soul. Alas, alas, and woe is me !”

Now if such shrieks as these be uttered by the souls of the departed in their prison-house, may God grant me grace to do my purgatory here. To listen only to such awful sounds must be punishment enough for the sins of a lifetime—but what must be the tortures which could wring them from the suffering souls?

But my boy spoke again, and the tones of his voice were as music. Well I ween that poor soul had rarely listened to such melody since first her punishment began.

“As long as alms, when I have wherewithal to bestow the same, or prayers and labor when I have not, can procure it, the holy Mass shall be offered for thee every day. And if so be that my God vouchsafe such grace to me, unworthy, when I come to man’s estate, I will vow myself to His service in the priesthood, and pray for thee while He shall see fit to leave me in this life. Build a chapel here, alas, I may not. But that which lieth with me will I surely do.”

Then did that poor spirit turn toward the boy and raise her hands, all torn and cut with brambles and rough stones, above his head as though in benediction, and as she bent her face I saw her tears fall upon his hair, where they lay like gems upon his clustering curls. So they rested for one moment, it may be, before the suffering maiden, weeping softly but not with the first bitterness of anguish, turned away. She faded like mist on a hillside,

and there remained with us no light save the struggling moonbeams, and my limbs were loosened so that I could move toward my boy. He remained like a kneeling statue, with his face hidden in his hands, and when I had struggled through brush and brier, and laid my hand upon his shoulder, he looked up, white and steadfast, but otherwise like one in a dream.

"Father, you heard?" was what he said ere he rose at my bidding—but those words, and the look wherewith he spake them, told me more plainly than even long discourse had done that he would never be mine as he had been. Henceforth he would be wholly God's.

We spake not one word as we walked home in the moonlight, and softly entered the house wherein all were sleeping soundly, with no dream of present horror or of coming sacrifice to break their rest. I saw my boy in bed and watched beside him until morning; so worn out was he and weary that I well-nigh had to lift him into bed. When morning broke I left him and the quiet homestead, and betook myself to the chapel at the Manor, whereof I always kept the key; and there, before the altar and the tabernacle which, if empty now, had been for more years than I could count the Lord's abiding-place, I prayed for strength and courage for myself, and his mother, and the boy.

That day he rode with me to Harley Court, where a priest of the old faith, a true man of God,

lay in hiding. And there did he and I cleanse our souls at shrift, and receive together the sacred body of the Lord.

Then was it arranged, according to that good man's counsel, that Roger, who had never wavered nor ever seemed to think such thing could be, should cross the seas as soon as means and leave could be obtained for him; and should enter himself as a student at the college at Rheims, where erst mine own brother Cuthbert had been before him, who was languishing now in the prison at Wisbeach, where we had striven to get sight of him in vain.

I deny not that my heart was heavy, for it seemed to me that my boy was doomed. And yet when I called to mind the woe of that poor soul who had once been Muriel Eversleigh, I could not begrudge him to her cause. The good priest promised to come, as soon as he could cross the country with any hope of safety, and abide with us for some time at Eversleigh. Then was it his intent to say Mass at the Manor, and even to watch for one night in the wood. And so Roger and I knelt for his blessing which had seldom been more needed, and we two rode back to the Grange, leaving a goodly sum to be expended as alms for the soul of Muriel and her kindred with the priest.

For himself he would not accept it, having at that time, as he said, no need of aught. But he promised to say the Masses, and to transfer the

alms to some other of his brethren less well provided than he, so might that poor unhappy soul gain more profit, and find more ease to her pain.

Adverse circumstances fell out, and that Father never came to Eversleigh, nor do I know what became of him at last. A few weeks later Roger left us, to the great grief of his mother and me. And here, to my shame, be it said, his mother, albeit her heart was rent with sorrow, gave up her treasure—seeing it was to God she gave him—less grudgingly than did I. But I have oftentimes noted that, weak as they be in matters of small moment, in the great occurrences of life women do most often show themselves to be made of stronger mettle than men. All this fell out some eight years ago; and while few or none of my friends made much of his going, not knowing for what purpose he went, yet now that there is talk of his being made priest there be some who show themselves disposed to blame me as one who hath risked all his son's chances in life.

I ween one sight of the suffering face, or but once to hear the wail of that poor maiden, had cured any should have encountered it of all faith in chances, even as it hath made me a sadder, but also methinks a wiser man.

And by God's mercy, which never forgetteth even the souls who suffer penance in the other world, it hath been so ordered that for the soul of Muriel

Eversleigh hath Mass been offered every day. And of that grace I trust and believe the benefit hath come to her; for every year at the time when I went there first for a whim of Roger's, have I watched through the night in the wood at Combe Eversleigh, but never once have I seen or heard that woful lady again.

The Tangle hath been cleared of weeds and brambles, and many times we go there together, my wife and I, to tell our beads and speak of Roger, and marvel when we shall see the boy, now grown to manhood, again.

He hath been once to visit mine Aunt Cicely at Kerugal, but I bade him speak no word to her or to my father of that we knew, since the knowledge would make them more desirous to purchase the plot at Eversleigh, which I well knew never could be theirs. But this paper I have written that my son may know and understand wherefore his elder brother Roger went beyond seas to become a priest, thereby exposing himself to peril both of liberty and life, should he return to this his native country, endangering all them that are his kin.

This paper will be opened only after my death, should that hap before I have made explanations by word of mouth. And I pray and command, as far as the power may lie with me, my son Lancelot and those who shall come after him, always to get the holy Mass said daily for the soul of Muriel Eversleigh, should it no longer be in Roger's power

to do the same. And this as they themselves hope to find mercy with God.

Here endeth the narrative of Marmaduke Ibbetson, afterwards Eversleigh.

Narrative and confession of Lancelot Ibbetson Eversleigh, grandson of Roger Ibbetson, and grand-nephew of Mistress Cicely Ibbetson of Kerugal, Brittany, and of Combe Eversleigh, England; writ for the instruction and more enlightenment—as well as warning—of the children, grandchildren, and other posterity of the said Lancelot Ibbetson Eversleigh, in the year of grace 1612, being the ninth of the reign of his Majesty King James the First.

Our lots have lain, by the Providence of God, in times so troublous, that them of the old religion have had much ado to live if so be they would follow the light of conscience and obey God's law. And to them of the house of Eversleigh, in especial, hath happed of late years adventures so strange that to write the history thereof for the instruction and direction of them who are to come after me hath been a duty which might not be lightly set aside.

All such papers as relate to the history of Mistress Muriel, to whose troubled soul may God in His infinite mercy grant eternal rest, have I gathered together into one place known to my sons, and thereto do I now add this, mine own narrative and

confession written with much shame, and, I trust me, even more contrite heart.

And the shame is not small; for it can be no light thing to a man to acknowledge his sin before his own children, who have held him in honor until now. May God set it against the guilt, I pray, of His mercy; and may the story of my evil example serve as a warning unto them for whom it is writ down.

For the clear understanding of that which befell in later years, it behooves that I go back to the days when I and my brother Roger were boys, long ere we had dreamed of such hap as that he or I should be master at Eversleigh. In those days, after the death of Sir Philip Eversleigh, who had conformed during his lifetime for fear of the laws, but by God's grace was reconciled again before he died, his only son, Sir Godfrey, who had seldom dwelt at Eversleigh, abode altogether in London, leaving to my father, Marmaduke Ibbetson, all the care of the Manor and the lands.

Methinks that for folk of the middle sort, such as we, there was no great danger for Catholics at our place; for we went not to the Church service on Sundays, and the neighbors knew well that my father had not, and never would, conform. There were others near us in like case, and even they who attended the services in the Church for form's sake were recusant at heart, and would gladly have returned to the old way if they might. And more-

over, my father was held in all trust by the owners of Eversleigh, and great power was in his hands. My grandfather, Roger Ibbetson, had gone over seas with his family, for the better education of his sons, and his children had all settled there, save two; mine own father and my Uncle Cuthbert, who had been made priest, and coming over to England, was taken and conveyed to the prison at Wisbeach, where he died.

Of us there were five children, whereof the two eldest were my brother Roger and I—between whose ages there was little more than a year; and I think there never could be two brothers less like, nor two that loved each other more; albeit an evil spirit took possession of my heart in course of time—yet even then, God knoweth I loved him well.

When it was that I first began to feel jealous of Roger and to know that he was more to my father than I could ever hope to be, I can not tell; nor could I say, even to myself, that I was in any way unjustly treated, for we two in all things fared alike, although Roger was the elder, and might, therefore, have been set before me, had my parents so willed. My father was a just man and loved all his children, but that very love made him quick to see faults, and severe in chastising them.

Now I was of quiet temper, and a lover of learning and books, so that even the Latin was a pleasure to me; while to Roger, who hated stillness, and would fain, both in summer and winter, have

dwelled out of doors, there was no greater torment than to pore over a printed page ; wherefore did he always what in him lay to escape from his lessons, and many a time lingered in the woods and meadows, when by good right he should have been studying Virgil or Horace in Parson Felton's parlor with me.

The praise I merited for diligence was duly awarded, and Roger for his misdoings felt the weight of the rod ; but always at such times I felt I would have borne his punishment with gladness, so only the love wherewith it was given might also have fallen to my share.

I know not if my brother saw this as I did, but methinks he must have noted that to our father his company was ever more welcome than mine—and so, whenever it might be, Roger was always at his side, while I was more often sent off than invited ; or if not dismissed to my books by my father, yet could I see that my presence was less welcome than Roger's, and was fain to leave them of my own accord.

So it came about that my father deemed me cold and unloving, and for my mother— I was too proud to show her my trouble, and she was ever busy with ordering of her house and the upbringing of my sisters, and with the maids. So had we reached the years of fourteen and fifteen or thereabouts, Roger and I ; he full of wild spirits, needing punishment frequently, and withal, greatly be-

loved ; I, silent and reproved but seldom, but with a heart often filled with bitterness—always aching for love.

And now a new trial befell me, whereof few could guess the greatness save such as in boyhood may have had the like to bear.

There dwelt at Combe Eversleigh a lad named Dick Fadgett, somewhat younger than I, and much like unto Roger in his blithe spirits and love of daring and the woods. He was the son of a poor widow who did household work at times for my mother, to whom it was well known that she had suffered in divers manners for the faith. With this Dickon did my Roger make firm friendship, until they became almost as brothers, whereas I, belike because I loved other things than they, was taken into their counsels but seldom, and being wounded in spirit and too proud to make complaint, held myself ever more aloof from them ; until I lived, for all boyish companionship, well-nigh alone.

Methinks that our good mother must have noted our conduct, and have spoken to Roger anent the same, for after a while he and Dick came to me often, and strove to win me to join their sports. I was sore and angry, deeming that Roger acted rather on compulsion than out of his own love for me ; and answered coldly that I needed none of their company, finding my books to be better friends than they.

Yet did the spirit of longing and unrest hold me when those two were together, and I strove by all means not absolutely dishonest to gain a knowledge of their plans and schemes.

It fell out that summer that wild tales were whispered in the village and among the men who labored on the home farm belonging to the manor whereof my father had charge, of sights and sounds not of this world that had been seen and heard in Eversleigh woods. These stories had ever a wondrous charm for me, but my father loved little that his children should listen to such; nor were they told in his hearing, therefore could we learn the rumors only by stealth.

I felt assured that Roger knew more than I, and would fain have asked him, only that pride held me back—the more that I one day overheard him proposing to Dick Fadgett that they should “speak to Lance of that story;” and when Dick made objection, Roger urged the thing no more.

But that day he came to me when I was sitting alone, and made as though he would open his mind to me, and then, albeit I was longing for his speech and company, I would not hearken, but only stooped the lower over my book.

“The tale I would tell thee hath more interest than that which thou porest over there,” said Roger; “throw aside thy lesson for this once, Dickon is waiting.”

Now I would have listened gladly to my brother,

but this hastening for Dick's sake was too much for me. I answered coldly that I was pressed for my Latin, and bade him begone to his friend.

So he left me, and I, putting away the Latin of which I had made false excuse, saw him in the garden walking to and fro in earnest talk with Dick. My mother came to me later and asked me, more anxiously than was her wont, what was working among us; and I answered moodily that I knew not—I had nought to do with them or their schemes.

All that day I watched Roger—well resolved to discover what he had in his mind; and when we went to bed after sunset that evening I noted that his prayers were longer and his speech shorter than his wont. He lay down on his bed on the other side of the chamber, and I lay down on mine.

Methought I heard my father's door open softly when evening was deepening into night, but I lay still and watched Roger. He slipped out of bed when the night was darkest—at some time ere ten of the clock it must have been—put on his garments stealthily with an eye ever glancing at me to see if I were sleeping, and then, with his shoes in his hand, stole quietly down the stairs.

I sprang out of bed and to the window which looked upon our garden and the gate; and there I could make out a form in the darkness, leaning on the wall—my father's I knew, and my heart contracted with bitterness.

I thought that he rather than Dick Fadgett was partner in Roger's plan for that night. Then I saw that this could scarce be by arrangement, for Roger started as in fear and surprise. But my father spoke and I would have given a finger to hear what he said. Whatever went on I must see to the end of it, and dragging my garments to the window, so that I might lose nought, I drew them over me in hot haste to be ready for aught that might betide. Stars came out presently as the clouds rolled away, and I saw that my father had his gun beside him leaning against the wall; and then as they stood there his arm was thrown around my brother's shoulders and the boy's head laid against it in such fashion as I had not seen my father use even with the little maids, toward whom he was wont to show more fondness than to us his sons.

The hot tears came into mine eyes, despite all pride of manhood—and none were by to see; but I brushed them away with my cold hands and crept down to the porch in readiness to follow my father and Roger, for somewhere I knew that they would go.

Long they stood there—until ten of the clock had sounded from the church in the village, and the moon came out; but at last my father opened the gate and they passed out together, closing it noiselessly, lest the house should be awakened, I trow.

One was awake already; and keeping well in the shadow, for I would not for the world be seen, I

followed all the way they went, and watched behind them, crouched among the bracken the while that they were waiting in the wood. Much would I have given to know what my father said to Roger, but jealous and angry as I was, I yet dared not venture near enough to hear what was in no wise meant for me.

Then came the sound of the most piteous sobbing, and methinks that even before my father and Roger I saw the woful lady toiling up the way; and overcome by the wild terror of the thing I fell face downward behind the roots of an ancient oak-tree to shut out the sight. How long I lay there I know not, but when I raised my head and looked cautiously about me I was alone in the wood, and a new fear came upon me—that my father would go with Roger to my chamber, and so learn that I had been away.

I rose to my feet, urged by a double terror now; for I feared again to see the specter lady, and almost as much I feared that my father would be at home before me. But when I reached the end of the wood I beheld him crossing the open park in the moonlight with my brother, and knowing the way that he would take, I fled by another. When he entered our chamber I was in bed. For hours my father sat by Roger's bed that night, and all the time I lay awake, afraid to stir lest he should speak to me. Toward morning he arose and left us, and then methinks I fell asleep.

That day my father and Roger rode to Harley Court, where, as I well knew, a priest lay in hiding; and for a moment I longed to ask leave to go with them that so I might get ghostly comfort, whereof I was sore in need. But then, methought, the priest would counsel me to speak of what I had seen in the wood to my father, and that was what I well resolved not to do. No long time after Roger was sent across the seas to study at Rheims and in later years, when I learned better to know my father, and was well assured of his love for all his children, I told him how I had been with him in the wood; and he in turn told me of all that he and Roger had seen and heard, and how my brother's vocation had been made known to him that night.

My father had the Tangle cleared of briers and bracken, and even set up seats of wood there, and went thither often with my mother and the little maids to tell their beads. But I never loved the place, nor went to it willingly; and rather than pass through it after nightfall would have gone a mile out of the beaten way.

The care of aiding my father in the business of Combe Eversleigh, which I had opined must fall to Roger's lot, came to me as I grew up to man's estate, and I loved the place, as all the Ibbetsons had done, as though it were mine own. Roger was made priest, and would fain have returned to his own country, but was not permitted so to do. My grandsire died in Brittany, and Sir Godfrey Evers-

leigh in London, whence he was brought back to be buried with much pomp in the old church. He was the last who bore the name of Eversleigh in his own right; and my grand-aunt Cicely, now an ancient woman of more than fourscore years, became lady and owner of that manor wherein as a poor dependant she had spent the flower of her young years.

She lived not long after, and was buried at Kerugal in Brittany, where my grandsire had settled, by them of her kin; but by her will the lands and manor of Combe Eversleigh came to my father, so only he took the name of Eversleigh added to his own, "and fulfilled another condition that he knew of." So was it laid down in mine Aunt Cicely's testament, whenever the same should be within his power.

All that she died possessed of in Brittany was left among our cousins who were there, saving always what jewels had been carried by Mistress Audrey from Combe Eversleigh, and a statue of Our Lady in fair white marble which had been lent by mine aunt to the parish church of Kerugal, and there had been much honored during many years. It was said that the good fisher-folk of that place were not to be comforted for the loss thereof when it was sent home, but it might by no means be left with them, for it was that image which should stand some day in the chapel to be built in the wood.

I wot well we felt eerie when we looked upon it first. And among the jewels that came to us—precious some of them, and such as had been worn by the grand-dames of Combe Eversleigh time out of mind—was one that we, my father and I, knew right well. We had seen its semblance in the hair of that poor Muriel, a spray of diamonds that shone like stars of fire.

My mother and my sisters cried out in wonder of its beauty when they saw it first, and, methinks, would gladly have had it bestowed upon them, for like all women they had great love for gems. But my father set it aside and let no one touch it. He would fain it had remained in Brittany, I ween.

Then had we to take the name of Eversleigh, and went to dwell in the Manor House, albeit somewhat against my father's will. But none had lived there since the death of Sir Philip, and we feared that the old house might tumble to pieces from disuse and lack of care. To find other tenants was impossible, so many were the tales told of spirits that were said to haunt the place, although the only men who had seen such were two who never spoke of it, and they were my father and I.

The manor was cleaned from roof-tree to cellar, and I verily believe that the wives of all the carters and plowmen on the countryside were called in to the work; for an army of these poured down upon us with pails and mops and such gear. And glad enough they were to come and work for our

money, and eat of our bread; for if we had been open-handed when only Ibbetsons of Eversleigh Grange, it behooved us much more, now that we dwelled at the manor, to treat the serving-folk well. And in truth we had ever been good neighbors to them that were about us, and most of all to them that were tenants of our own. Yet our good fortune gave them small pleasure, for farmers and country-folk seldom love to see others rise above them, as I have often noted, and we now experienced to our cost.

Mine old friend and tutor, Parson Felton, had been dead some years when we went to the manor, but a nephew of his who bore his name had taken his place. And this man, albeit not as familiar in our house, nor perhaps as friendly as his uncle had been while my father was only land-steward to the owners of Eversleigh, had shut his eyes on our recusancy, and so we had been left in peace.

But after wealth came to us he changed in this matter and hinted often to my father that he must needs conform, or worse may come of it—whereat my father laughed and paid no heed.

But methinks I have well-nigh forgotten the scrubbing whereof I have nathless this much to say. My father gave orders that the chamber called Mistress Muriel's should be set in fair order, with hangings to the doors and windows, and all things in seemly array. Then did he carry in privily the image of Our Lady that had come from

Brittany, and forthwith locked the door, and placed the key in that room wherein he had bestowed such books and papers as pertained to the business of the land. If my good mother knew wherefore this was done she spake no word, and albeit my sisters were curious as others of their sex and age, they knew my father too well to question aught that he saw fit to do. When we had been living at the manor a month, it may be, the great hall, too, was shut up, and when my father told me that this must be done, he said :

“Prithee, Lance, pray always for the soul of that poor child.”

Alas, I prayed far less than he did. The evil of the times wherein I had lived always had chilled my faith somewhat, although, I thank God, it had not died out entirely in my soul. I knew that my father gave great alms for Masses, and had it ever in mind to build a chapel in the Tangle when the times should mend. Now that years had passed since the night when I had followed him and Roger, and the old sense of awe and terror had grown fainter with time, I sometimes, yet but seldom, walked to that part of the wood ; and then I could not but note that the stones which lay about there were moss grown and sunk among the weeds and ferns as though none ever disturbed them, and that I knew they used not to be.

So I trusted that if Muriel's penance were not ended, at least she toiled no more in the wood.

But I wondered if she were seen in the great hall since my father had closed it, and suffered none of us to enter even by day.

Time went on. We grew to be settled at the manor, almost as though we had known no other home; and a tenant at will dwelt at the Grange, whither my father jestingly declared I must remove when I should marry; but my mother avowed that the manor held space enough for all.

My father had his will. I won a wife and we dwelt at the Grange; and fair children were born to us, who were all baptized in the old faith—the third by my brother Roger, who had come home to us at last. And one reason of his coming was to move my father to settle Combe Eversleigh on me and my heirs, since it were ill for him—a Catholic priest—to hold lands.

In all this time I had heard nought of any in our house being troubled by the spirit of Muriel Eversleigh. I knew that my father was wont, at times, to watch in the Tangle until past midnight, and sure I am that he spent many an hour in prayer before the image of Our Lady, but he saw Muriel no more.

Then one day, while Roger was with us, my brother came to me and asked me to walk with him. His face was pale as that of a corpse might be, and his eyes were sunken and wan as though he had not slept. He came to tell me that I was the heir of Combe Eversleigh, and to charge me by my

love for him, and by my hopes of salvation, to build, if ever it should lie in my power to do so, a chantry chapel of Our Lady in the wood.

And then I won him to confess that he had watched all night in Muriel's chamber, and that her spirit had not even yet found rest.

"Pray, and get Masses offered, Lance," said Roger; "and keep any who might be terrified out of Muriel's chamber and the great hall. Please God these troubles will be past ere many more years, and then Englishmen may serve their God in peace and safety, and thou wilt build a chapel so that poor soul may find rest. Truly His judgments be terrible. Who shall stand before the face of His wrath?"

That was all he told me at that time, but I heard later that he had seen Muriel attired as of old. Only in so far was her condition improved that she was kneeling in prayer before her own image of Our Lady, and not weeping and wailing as had been her habit. Shortly after that Roger left us, and albeit he had abode with us in disguise and under another name than ours, yet was information laid against him, and he was arrested ere he had been absent from the manor three days.

It chanced at a time when men's minds were excited, because King James, remembering perchance what had been the faith of his mother, had knighted divers Catholic gentlemen of this country, and had called others to court. So loud was

the outcry raised in consequence by them of the reformed religion, that His Majesty deemed it needful for his own safety to prove that he was a good Protestant at heart; and so ordered the old laws to be enforced with more rigor than ever.

So our Roger came to his death; and albeit none was ever more proud of earthly honors won by their children than my father of that martyr's crown, it killed him; and my mother followed him to her rest ere a month was done.

Two of my sisters had ere this taken the veil in the Low Countries, and the third was married and away. So now we were alone with our children, my wife and I, and verily at times I thanked God that it was so, and that my father was spared the troubles that came upon me.

I have said that the manor had been long empty when mine Aunt Cicely died, and much had to be done to the old house apart from the women and their brooms. Then had my sisters to receive their portions, so there was small store of gold at Combe Eversleigh when all was done. And now, whether it was that the death of my brother Roger had drawn the attention of great ones, albeit it was not known for certain that he was of our kin; or whether Parson Felton laid the matter before the King's Majesty, I can not say. But certain it is that orders were sent down from London for more strict enquiry to be made into the lives of all, and

that fines should be most rigorously exacted from them that would not conform.

So for not attending sermons in the church o' Sundays; and for not receiving what they mis-called the Supper of the Lord; and for keeping Catholic books whereof there was great store at the Grange and more in the bookroom at the manor; and for supporting servants who held unto the ancient faith, than which none others had been about us until then—was I fined. And, moreover, a set of men armed with King's warrant, and calling themselves searchers—proving by their deeds moreover that they had good right to the name—came about through men's dwellings with full leave to seek for and profane holy relics and images—whereof some were destroyed at that time which had been in possession of the families that owned them since the days of the Crusades.

Small marvel was it that men waxed desperate under such usage; the less that of them who called themselves Catholic many were no saints and, moreover, but poorly instructed in the faith. Ye all know how it ended, and the wretched story of the Gunpowder Plot; and how we of the old faith had to blush and hang our heads for many a day, bearing the shame due rightly to only a few maddened and misguided men.

Martyrs were done to death in those days; but well I ween there were also many who shed not their blood, yet suffered more in God's sight even

than they; hundreds who were brought to direst poverty by fines and exactions, and yet clung to the old faith with love and reverence, practising their religion constantly, albeit in secret, in despite of all.

Now these men had the true spirit of martyrs, but of such was not I. To me it seemed that all the world had gone wrong; and even that God sided with iniquity and had no care for His own. But should I, for that, lose all care for them that depended on me? Should I bring my children to beggary for a religion that cost more than their upbringing, and whose practice must, ere long, force them, if not me, to sell the fair lands of Eversleigh, and leave us with no roof over our heads save that of a prison—if so be we were resolved to abide in our own land?

I was weary with much thinking, all the more that I dared say no word of such thoughts to my wife. For albeit no more faithful and obedient helpmate ever blessed a man's home, yet was her sense of duty stronger than her love for me; and well I knew that she would face poverty and death for herself and the children, who were dearer than herself, rather than falter in the service that she owed her God.

But to my false heart I muttered that women were fanatics often. Mine Aunt Cicely had been such, and my mother had let Roger devote himself to exile and death, and what had come of it all?

And now the searchers were at hand and might come any day to Eversleigh and force an entrance, the which indignity I was resolved not to brook.

There were others of like standing with me, who were held to be good men and true; ay, and in their hearts were devoted to the old religion even as I. Neither would I see my children come to want. All this was I resolving in my mind one summer evening, as I sat alone in the small chamber where stood the desk which had been mine at the Grange, and into which few came save such as had business connected with the lands. There stood on that desk a crucifix wrought in ivory, which had been given to my grandsire, Roger Ibbetson, by mine old Aunt Cicely when they both were young! and he had placed it there to mind him of his duty both to God and man, as I had often heard my father say.

So while two generations had come and gone it had fulfilled its mission, and I, of the third, had often drawn help and strength from the contemplation of that thorn-crowned brow. But the times were altered now. I must fend for myself without aid from such toys, as many a better man had learned to do—and yet the thought seemed blasphemous.

In mine agony I groaned aloud. I bowed my head upon my crossed arms to shut out the sight of the image of my Lord, but it was graven on my brain and would not go. May none of them into

whose hands this writing may chance to fall ever know such anguish as was mine that night. And the devil all but conquered, for my will was on his side. How long I sat there I know not, but at last I could abide no longer; I was stifling with mine own wild struggle. My heart and brain were on fire.

So I rose at last and walked into the open air. It was a glorious night of summer. The sky was spangled with a thousand stars, a young moon hung her silver crescent over the woods, and the cool night breeze played softly on my fevered brow. The world, my world, was wondrous beautiful. I could not give it up. I must save my children—and Combe Eversleigh. True it was that I must strive with my boys to undo old teaching; it would be no easy task to win over my wife. But obedience to my lightest will was the habit of their lives, and my will must be law now as it ever had been, even with her.

My mind became tranquil and at ease, for I deemed the struggle over; and I wandered on, partly in enjoyment of that luxury of coolness and soft light; partly in forgetfulness of place and hour, but pondering ever how I might most surely, and by shortest means, bring over them of my house to my new way, until I found at my feet a great stone all moss-covered, whereon, being half wearied, I sat down.

My head drooped upon my hand as I listened

idly to the tinkling of the waterfall, and then there broke upon the stillness of the night a sudden sound—the great clock of the church at Combe Eversleigh was striking twelve.

Where was I? I arose and looked around. About and around me were the woods at Combe Eversleigh, but for many a long year I had not been in this part of them. For these were the trees of the Tangle; I was on the spot where Muriel had vowed to build a chapel of Our Lady and had failed to keep her word. And I—what was I about to do? A cold shudder ran through me as I thought of the night long years ago, when I had followed my father and Roger to this very spot, and of all that we had seen and heard.

But there was short space allowed me for memories. A strange, soft light that was not of this world shone upon the path before me, and in its midst I saw again, even as I had seen her on that awful night—the form of Muriel Eversleigh.

A cold sweat broke out upon my limbs, and my hair stood erect upon my forehead as I gazed and could not move on or turn away. She wore the same bright garment as of old, but made no sound of wail or sobbing; and her face was calm with a most unearthly beauty, but strangely stern and set for one so young.

Slowly and steadily she moved toward me, and never once withdrew her eyes from mine until she came so close that I could have touched her with

my hand. Then she spoke; and her voice, albeit sweet and clear and so distinct that mine ears, despite my terror, lost no tone thereof, sounded as though it came from far away:

"Lancelot Eversleigh," she said, "how wilt thou endure to dwell in everlasting flames?" and even as she spoke she stretched her arm toward me, still fixing on my face that gaze of deep, unutterable sadness, and laid her slender hand upon my wrist. Was ever mortal agony like the pain I felt?

For all my lusty manhood and the fear of what men might say of me, except that utterance was denied me, I had screamed aloud. She held me while she spake again:

"Wilt thou, for the sake of earth's blessings, draw down upon thy house the curse of God?"

"In the name of God," I gasped, "what shall I do?"

"Trust in Him whose very punishments are mercies, and condemn not thine own soul to hell," she answered as she loosed my hand. "If thou provest traitor to thy God, His anger shall come upon thee. Thy children shall be taken in their innocence, and thy name shall die out in the land. Oh, man! man! couldst thou but know what it is to be deprived, through thine own fault, of the blessed vision of thy God! Repent and do penance while yet time remains to thee, Lancelot Eversleigh; and trust the earthly future of thy children to their Lord."

"And is there then hope for me?" I cried in anguish, "will penitence blot out a sin like mine?"

"What sin is there that penitence can not blot out?" she said. "Seest thou not that even mine have been forgiven? Our God is merciful, if He is just. Ay, His mercy is above all His works; else had I been miserably lost forever. Yet wouldst thou shrink from penance such as mine."

"Alas, poor soul, what can I do for thee?" I asked, for I saw that she was suffering exceedingly, albeit with a sweet patience that had comfort in it, too.

"Save Combe Eversleigh, so that a chapel may be builded here in time," she answered; "and get the holy Mass offered when thou canst. It is said for me daily in Brittany. Therefore am I spared that penance which once I had to do here in this wood. For thy brother's sake to-night have I been sent to thee. Repent, Lancelot Eversleigh! Repent, while time remains to thee! How wilt thou dwell in everlasting flames!"

I had sunk upon my knees and hidden my face in my hands. I heard her weeping as her words were ended, and looking up, beheld her gazing at me through her tears, and then, like mist in the sunshine, she vanished slowly away. Then did I fall prostrate among the ferns that grew there, thanking God for all His mercies, and imploring pardon for my sin. I went not home until the dawn broke, and well I ween I was an altered man.

We spent that day, my wife and I and one or two of the more faithful of our servitors, men who had been with us well-nigh a lifetime, and were moreover of the ancient faith, in carrying to a secret hiding place under the old Manor House the image of Our Lady, and every crucifix and holy picture that we had; and I thank God they were saved. And His mercy, since that day, hath been beyond my desert. For albeit we were mulcted in fines heavy and frequent, and the searchers came to us more than once, yet did we prosper in our worldly goods more than ever before, and never did those men discover our hiding-place, nor one of our own betray us at any time into their hands.

But on mine arm hath ever since that night been the mark of burning fingers, and a wound that no leech's skill can heal. Only, at times, when the pain is sharpest so that I can by no means sleep, doth my wife bind it with fair linen steeped in holy water, which alone can assuage the anguish of the burn. And to none other save to her, and to a priest of God to whom I went to shrift as soon as might be after my most grievous fall, have I ever discovered the cause of that ailment until now. And that same priest did afterward spend some weeks in hiding at Eversleigh and watched through one night in the room we called Muriel's chamber, and said Mass in the morning for her suffering soul.

And what he saw there I know not for certain;

but this he told me ere he left us, that not for worlds would he spend a night in that chamber again. And he did charge me on my hope of salvation to have Muriel's chapel builded when I could. And so God knoweth I would, most gladly, but the time when I might hath never come. This much did I through interest of some in power whom I had obliged—I had Combe Eversleigh settled by law upon them that shall come after me in such fashion that it must pass from father to son of the Ibbetson Eversleighs, and may by none of them be sold or willed away. And this I did that when more peaceful times shall come for them of the old faith, my children, or theirs, may have it in their power to build that chapel in the wood. And I do humbly entreat all who may read this writing to pray for me, a miserable sinner; and for that poor Muriel Eversleigh who was sent by God in His mercy to prevent the loss of my soul.

Here endeth that part of the writing of Lancelot Eversleigh which related to his own confession, and the apparition of Muriel Eversleigh that he saw.

End of the confession of Lancelot Eversleigh.

Copy of paper written and signed by Lancelot Marmaduke Ibbetson Eversleigh, priest, at Combe Eversleigh, in the year of Grace 1685.

I, Lancelot Marmaduke Ibbetson Eversleigh,

priest, knowing that my brother Roger Ibbetson Eversleigh, owner of Combe Eversleigh, did purpose to build a chantry chapel dedicated to Blessed Mary at that place, had promised always that, God giving me grace, I would say or sing the first Mass that should be offered therein for the souls of Marmaduke and Muriel Eversleigh, and for the souls of their kin and ours.

And when the said chapel was finished, I did get leave from my Bishop to go down into those parts, and I did say the Mass as I had promised; albeit privily and with few witnesses, and at an early hour of the day before dawn. And when that the Mass was finished, and all had departed in haste, I did still remain in the chapel praying for the souls of them who, for so many generations, had willed to have it there.

And lifting up mine eyes as I kneeled in prayer, I beheld by the chancel railings, on her knees, a lady of most wondrous beauty, whose like I think was never before looked upon in this world. And I deemed that a vision of Holy Mary, Our Lady, had been vouchsafed to me, and would fain have prostrated before her, but could in no wise stir. Then I heard a voice of such wondrous melody that methinks in heaven can scarce be music more sweet, and these words were spoken so clearly and so forcibly withal that meseemed they were imprinted on my soul.

“I am she who was Muriel Eversleigh, and who

was doomed for her sins to do penance in this place so long. To-day, thanks to the charity of thy brother and thyself, I am at rest; and now I may enjoy the vision of my God. And thou mayst bid them of the household of Combe Eversleigh to live henceforward in peace, for verily I shall trouble them no more."

And then she seemed to rise as an angel might have done, and I bowed my head in thankfulness to God for His great mercy, and when I looked again she was gone. And from that time, nigh upon two years ago, until now, the house at Combe Eversleigh hath been troubled by no visitant from the other world; nor hath aught been seen in any part of it that could cause disturbance or affright. And I myself have slept in the room that is called Muriel's chamber, where heretofore none could be in peace; but by nothing was I molested or disturbed. Neither there nor in the great hall, where also I had passed many hours both by day and by night. Therefore do I trust in God that that poor suffering creature hath found joy at last. So may all the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.

(Signed) LANCELOT MARMADUKE I. EVERSLEIGH.

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